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# FATHER GODFREY.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“ANNE DYSART,” “ARTHUR,”

&c. &c.

“La religion, la société, la nature, telles sont les trois luttes de l'homme.”

*Les Travailleurs de Mer.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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# FATHER GODFREY.

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## CHAPTER I.

### BROTHER AND SISTER.

“MY dear, let me introduce my son,  
Mr. Augustus Higginson!”

Such were the words which interrupted the sort of day-nightmare in which I left Helen at the end of the last chapter. She turned, as in duty bound, at that moment pleased and comforted to be introduced even to Mr. Augustus Higginson.

For, to be a pariah is much more mortifying than to be a martyr.

The lamps were now lighted, and Helen could see that Augustus Higginson was tall beyond the ordinary height of man—taller even than his father. But, instead of the red face and cumbrous proportions of the paper-bag Colossus, his height was well carried, and his movements so completely under control, that they might be called elegant. His features were pale and refined; very fine dark eyes lighted up his face; and his head was set off to advantage by an abundance of fashionably-cut hair. His dress was decidedly clerical, yet not so pronounced in its professionalism as to be unbecoming or remarkable. Mr. Augustus Higginson undoubtedly looked like a gentleman, and the type of man to which Helen had been accustomed. Had it not been for a slightly lofty bow as his mother introduced him, she would have been prepossessed in

his favour. She thought, "He despises his sister's governess," and she answered his bow by one still haughtier.

But Helen was mistaken. It was Mr. Augustus Higginson's usual way of treating the Smokeham young ladies. The fact of Helen's being a governess would have operated rather in the contrary direction. If the Smokeham young ladies were devoted to Mr. Bignell's curates in general, they were devoted to Augustus Higginson in particular. This devotion, I am sorry to say, he was in the habit of repaying by an air of lofty indifference, with occasional little gleams of condescension, which gladdened the hearts of the recipients, as a sunburst may be supposed to gladden an Arctic explorer amidst the all but hopeless fogs and snows of an ice-pack. But we are not to suppose, on that account, that Mr. Augus-

tus Higginson was really indifferent to the devotion. It was decidedly pleasant to him. He missed it as he would have missed the sugar in his coffee.

Now, although he took a seat within a conversible distance, he wrapped himself up in a lofty silence, waiting for the incense he expected. To do him justice, he had meant, on the present occasion, to be gracious and condescending. He wanted to please his mother, who had given him to understand that the governess was a favourite; and he had also confessed to himself that she was by no means a bad-looking girl.

Helen was dressed in white. A dark rose from the greenhouse ornamented her warm-toned hair, and there was that sort of glow on her cheek which has more of the tenderness of a reflection than the prononcé bloom of a "standing colour." That home-yearn-

ing had left on her countenance lingering traces of its passion, and her eyes, which were as dark and expressive as those of her brother, shone with a wistful light which gave them both pathos and power. In Helen's face there was, one would have said, tenderness and strength, but, most of all, warmth—warmth as of a hidden fire, hidden by maidenly dignity—perhaps, in some degree, by sensitive pride. But, of all the strangers then present, Augustus Higginson was the only one who had, in any degree, understood that she was pretty.

Augustus waited in vain for the customary incense. His resolution to be gracious did not seem to be rewarded by the opportunity which its magnanimity so conspicuously deserved. Helen sat quite silent, still occasionally casting a glance at

the lingering daylight, which was now nothing but a yellow border to a vast expanse of silver-pale sky. But Augustus was not going to be baffled in this way. She should admire him like other girls. Since the mountain would not come to Mahomet, Mahomet, we know, had to make a virtue of necessity, and so did Mr. Augustus Higginson.

"Do you like Smokeham?" he began, drawing his chair a little nearer. It would be vain to deny that Helen was pleased that he addressed her, but she answered, with much less apparent gratification than he was used to,

"I am very happy here. I meet with every kindness."

"But you don't like the place."

"It is not a pretty place."

"Don't you think so? I like my native

place. I am, in fact, proud of being a Smokehamite."

Helen looked at his face to see if he were jesting. Mr. Augustus Higginson was fond of surprising the Smokeham young ladies. He liked to give utterance to the most unexpected opinions, in order that thus he might have the gratification of hearing them contradict themselves, and watch the means more or less artful by which they came round to his views. He was in truth rather a conceited young man. But he watched vainly for any such demonstration on the part of Helen Godfrey.

"There is no accounting for taste," she said—it must be confessed without much originality either of idea or expression, yet it had all the effect of originality upon Mr. Augustus Higginson. Was Helen really presuming to question his taste? This was



not to be endured. She must and should admire him.

He now began to ask her if she ever went to Mr. Bignell's church.

No, Helen never went to Mr. Bignell's church.

"It was too ritualistic for her," she said, flattering herself that she was manfully, or, at least, womanfully maintaining the strict evangelical principles in which she had been brought up. But unless martyrdom consists in self-complacency, and a certain triumphant combativeness, Helen could not have been considered a martyr on this occasion. Was it not she rather than Augustus who had enjoyed the pleasure of contradiction?

"Ah," said Augustus, "we must convert you."

Helen was not half aware of the compliment her companion was paying her by this

expression of interest in her conversion, but the conversation was not disagreeable to her. Her eyes looked bright and interested, and there was an arch smile on her lips which was very becoming.

"You had better not try," she said, "for I warn you it will be only waste of time."

"I could not have conceived you were a Low Churchwoman, Miss Godfrey. You don't look like one."

"What is a Low Churchwoman like?"

"Middle-aged, severe in face, thin in person, and strong-minded altogether."

"And I am young and fat and weak-minded. I don't see how you can know about my being weak-minded."

"Now that is not quite fair, Miss Godfrey. You should not talk such nonsense."

"I fancied I was quite safe following your example, Mr. Higginson."

Augustus almost stared at her presumption, yet he admired her for it.

"At any rate, you will come to St. Michael's. I will come and fetch you any morning you please."

"Where is that you are going to take Miss Godfrey?" said his father, suddenly stepping up to them, and breaking off for the purpose a conversation with Captain Graves.

"To St. Michael's Church. But, as there is not the slightest chance of my being converted to ritualism, there can be no use in my going."

"Hoch, hoch, ho!" laughed Mr. Higginson, amused and approvingly. "These fiddle-faddles, and flowers, and crosses, and scrapings are for folks that have nothing to do, and not for you and me, Miss Godfrey,

that have got our bread to earn, and other folk's bread too."

"It is time for Ada and Gertrude to go to bed," said Helen. "I shall go upstairs with them." And with a bow to father and son, she slipped away unnoticed by the rest of the party.

"A very sensible young woman, and a very pleasant-tempered one," said Mr. Higginson. "Now, Gus, you may make fools of the Smokeham girls as much as you like, but you shan't make a fool of Miss Godfrey!"

"It seems to me that it would not be very easy to make a fool of Miss Godfrey."

"Well, then, don't let her make a fool of you."

Augustus reddened indignantly.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I have done a good deal to raise you all

to a good position, and all I ask you is to keep it."

"That is what I mean to do," Augustus answered, a little haughtily.

After a short pause, Mr. Higginson again began—

"Sir Anthony Hayward seems vastly taken with your sister. He is a very superior man, clever at county business, old family, and a pretty property, though a little encumbered."

Augustus glanced across the room. He quite understood his father, and felt not a little indignant that he, Augustus Higginson, should have been thought capable of falling in love with a governess. Ethel, in the meantime, looking radiant and triumphant, was engaged in earnest conversation with Sir Anthony Hayward, who evidently admired her.

Could they have seen into his heart at that moment, they would have found him telling himself that she was young and handsome, and would do the honours of any man's house with credit. And how useful her money would be in paying off the mortgages—if it were only not for her belongings!

The mother in particular was a very large bolus to swallow. She was very fat and short-necked. Was there no hope of a fit of apoplexy? Well, Easter was just over; he would have time to think of it while he was in town. From what he had seen of Ethel Higginson, and from what he had learned of the Smokeham manufacturers through the experiences of his canvass, he did not think it at all likely that he would be forestalled before his return. When he bade Ethel good night, he regretted that

“parliamentary duties, and the interests of his constituents, required his immediate return to town ;” but he hoped, pointedly, he “should have an early opportunity of renewing the acquaintance he had been so fortunate as to make.” This speech had exactly the effect it was intended it should have.

Sir Anthony Hayward was a gentleman certainly of the straitest sect, and without a flaw to the title in the eyes of “society.” Yet there was not a trader in Smokeham more keen-sighted to his own interest. The mortgages on his property were none of his own making, and some of them he had already paid off. Sir Anthony Hayward could not make up his mind to marry entirely for money, or he might probably have already got rid of the rest. What he wanted was an opportunity to follow the

“Quaäker feller's” advice, so admired by Tennyson's “Northern Farmer.”

“Doan't thou marry for munny, but goa wheer munny is!”

And now here was the opportunity. What did it signify that he was twenty years older than Miss Higginson? He was not at all bald, and only a little grey; he had a straight nose, and a fine peaked beard, and was only beginning to be a very little stout. Was not that her affair? and her manner was not calculated to drive him to despair. Ethel felt the evening had been a success. All the party, men and women alike, had been attentive to her. She felt she had made good her place in society; and she had no misgiving about her power to retain it. In one of her very best humours she came up to Helen's room the next day to talk over the party. As Helen had sometimes



felt before, she took no interest except in what related to herself; yet she was so pleasant and cordial, it was difficult not to like her when treated as her dearest friend. She talked of Sir Anthony Hayward, whose conversation, she said, had been "charming." If so, the charm must have been owing to the subject, as, though a sensible, he was rather a prosy man. But then he was up in the talk of the day, knew the on-dits of the great world, and altogether bore about with him a certain subtle aroma of that upper stratum of the social atmosphere in which alone Ethel felt she should ever be able to breathe freely.

Yet Ethel was not so worldly as Helen fancied. She would hardly, for instance, have married Lord Methuselah, "old, wigged, and wicked"; and with whom pleasant hallucinations would have been quite impos-

sible. She would really have much preferred a man with the allotment of brains and teeth, and character, stamped with the approbation of society in general, even if he should have only five or ten thousand a year, to a peer of eighty, bald, and toothless, and brainless, with an income four times that sum. But to belong to the "higher classes,"—"upper ten thousand," she knew to be a revoltingly vulgar phrase,—was a necessity of her nature.

Probably she did not mistake herself; and her present biographer does not mean to be hard on her. Her mind was not as the mind of Smokeham. Naturally Smokeham was angry. Naturally it felt sour and affronted when this fact broke upon its consciousness. Naturally it remembered how Higginson père had tramped on foot into the town, with only a shilling in his

pocket, seeking for employment; and this within the memory of many living, who were certainly more like gentle-folks than the paper-bag improver and his wife.

## CHAPTER II.

## SOWING THE WIND.

MORE than a year had passed since that hasty interview in the reception-room of St. Prisca's Anglican Home, which seemed to conclude a brief but pregnant episode in the life of Leigh Wynford.

The scene is changed from Smokeham. Here are no tall chimneys waving aloft streaming pennons of blackest smoke; no grim, red factories, with interminable rows of dust-darkened windows. The roads are not black with coal-dust. The men whom you meet have not the brawny muscles and

the pallid faces of those who labour with pick-axe and shovel in the bowels of the earth; or who, in forges and furnaces, wield heavy hammers in an atmosphere to which the temperature of Madras or Jamaica is cool and refreshing.

Here the working-people look clean and fresh, and sometimes picturesque, as if they had walked out of books of costumes, or had been getting ready for a fancy-ball. No desert, blackened and banned by toil and industry, suggests the price we pay in human struggle and human life for those common necessities which we receive as mere matters of course, like the sunshine and the air, as if there were not creatures, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, who had to give up even air and sunshine to procure them for us. It was very different here. Nothing suggested toil. All bespoke pleasure and re-

pose. The present century—this whirlpool among the ages, seemed at a cursory glance scarcely to have set its seal on the physiognomy of the place. All was expressive rather of the slow and dreamy past. Round about lay the hills, black with forest, and romantic with ruined Burg and legendary Schloss. Down the valley leapt and sparkled the blithe little trout stream, untainted by manufactories or works of any kind, save the wheel of a water-mill. Among the forests gleamed haunted lakes, and hid miracle-storied hermitages; and, like a pearl on the dark bosom of the hills, lay the fashionable watering-place of Baden-Baden, which not even chignons and polonaises, or any other modish distortion: not even men of the period, flirtations and blacklegs can vulgarize, except to the vulgar, to whom all things are vulgar.

But, in spite of appearances, the place, as we know, does contain a most modern and a most vulgar nineteenth-century life, compared with which that life in the Blackshire desert, among the pits and the furnaces, is as an epic poem to a copy of verses in a school-girl's album, if that peculiar form of sentimentalism has not, as I strongly suspect, vanished even from ladies' schools before the "fastness" of the age.

Here we are in a world of sensation-seekers—the few finding what they look for in the impressive beauty of the place, and in that spirit of mediæval romance which seems to breathe in the very air; the many in carrying out, on a miniature theatre, the pleasures and the passions of the European capitals. But if the stage is small, the pleasures and the passions are probably only the more concentrated and the more intense.

It is night, early in September, and the "season" is beginning to wane in the Schwarzwald. But as the weather is fine, people as yet are only talking of going. The evenings, however, are chilly, and the band, forsaking the circular stand outside, has taken refuge in the orchestra of the Conversations-haus. Thither also has followed the audience. The outside benches and chairs, and little round, slate-coloured coffee-tables, are a desolation. But the stately hall, and the imposing suite of rooms inside, are all the more populous. They are free of access to all respectably-dressed persons, for here, as everywhere else, the "clothes-horse" idea of man has to the full its legitimate weight. In each of these large, lofty rooms, mirrored, gilded, silk-draped, brilliantly-lighted, is at least one table where they are playing rouge-et-noir or



roulette, surrounded by circles of players and spectators, five or six deep, the inner of which is seated.

In London we should call such a place by the name which our grandfathers thought unfit to mention to polite ears. But our generation, with perhaps as true a delicacy, calls a spade a spade. There must be something local about respectability. The place we should shun in London, almost as much as its prototype in the below-stairs of the world to come, we visit openly at "the Bads." We can enjoy the little taste of naughtiness without fear of Mrs. Grundy—that all-terrible keeper of the world's conscience; for Mrs. Grundy, like all the world, "looks in" here herself, adding now to her other reasons for so doing, that, "thank heaven, these things are passing away, and one wants to see them to feel how thankful

we ought to be." The only disappointment one feels, perhaps, is, that, after all, there is apparently so little that looks naughty to see. But the old serpent is wilier far than good people give him credit for. Like the spider's reception-room in Mary Howitt's clever ballad, this Gehenna above ground

"Is the very prettiest parlour ever you did spy,"

and the guests the most polite and well-behaved ladies and gentlemen. In Mrs. Grundy's own drawing-room sensationalism of manner is not more thoroughly tabooed, or propriety more strictly observed. If Gustave Doré's picture be a statement of fact, and is not merely evolved from his own consciousness of what gambling ought to look like, he must have beheld these gambling-tables—now about to become merely historical—under different circumstances, or at a

different period of the night from that on which they were seen by me.

It is now ten o'clock. Round one of the tables I have described, not the roulette,—for the name is so descriptive, one cannot mistake that,—but round another, rouge et noir, the uninitiated writer believes, is gathered a large and increasing party, and the play is waxing brisker and brisker. The seated inner circles, composed of the determined players, are still, however, chatting pleasantly and unconcernedly to their friends, as they make some entry on little tablets which lie ready to their hands, or as they stake their silver, or gold, or bank-notes, by laying them on the green table checkered with gilt lines, and ornamented in one spot by a patch of red. Only the dealer and his vis-à-vis seem absorbed by the business of the table. With one exception, no one looks especially excited. That one exception is a

young man seated on the right-hand of the dealer. Very few, in a survey of the scene, would have passed him over. He was still in the spring of early manhood.

*"Her face was like an April morn,  
Clad in a wintry cloud."*

So runs an old ballad. But the April face of this young man was clad rather in the lurid cumulus out of which the lightning leaps in hot and blasé August. There was a feverish look in his blue eyes, a flush on his cheeks, and his hands, as he staked his money, or lifted his cards, visibly trembled. Now and then he swept nervously his light curling locks back from his forehead, to which the flush had mounted in the intense sensation of the moment. But the look it now wore seemed hardly native to that face. Rather it seemed some modern instance of "possession," as if some foreign demon had

effected a lodgment in an abode meant for an altogether different tenant.

This youth had been seen at the Baden gaming-tables every night now for some weeks ; and not only at the tables. He had been conspicuous also at the races, and on all sporting occasions ; and he was well known in the ball-room, and in the gardens, as a dancer, as a male flirt of the most uncompromising character. His reputation had preceded him from Homburg and Wiesbaden. All the ladies were eager to see him. He was said to be rich, handsome, clever, and fascinating. He was skilled in all manly exercises, he was the fastest of the fast, and yet it was whispered he could be, too, the tenderest of the tender. In short, he was said to be quite a lady-killer ; but this feminine slaughter he did not effect by the impassivity fashionable—at least, in novels.

Utter brutality was not exactly in his nature ; his heart had not yet hardened into muscle ; his brain was not entirely composed of cotton wool. Undemonstrative stolidity of countenance was not yet, even his ideal of the most effective expression of mental power. No, he made love in the more old-fashioned way, which, even in these advanced days (when, having discovered we are descended from brutes, we are—perhaps out of reverence for our ancestors—inclined to an apotheosis of the brutal), brought down the game with sportsman-like precision. If the hero with brow of brass, and imagination dull as a coffin-lid, slays his thousands, this young roué, with his fiery brain and his poetic tongue, had slain his tens of thousands. It is just possible he had not much more compassion or remorse than he of the brazen brow ; but, if he had not, he did not

plume himself upon the fact, but said to himself, with a sort of apologetic vindictiveness, that women could not feel like men; that their love, compared with man's, was

“As moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine.”

Who had had a better right than himself to be happy? Had he not been honest and true and loving? Providence did not seem to have kept faith with him. No, it was everyone for his own happiness. What difference did it make that, for a consideration—the consideration, as they thought, of its lasting for ever—that some persons postponed that happiness to the life beyond the dark valley, while they purchased it with the tears and the anguish of those who loved them? Were such persons really of the kingdom of Heaven? If so, he did not want to belong to that kingdom. If so,

“Let us eat and drink and—be glad to die.” That should be his motto.

It had been his motto. On the joyous receptivity of pleasant and flattering impressions which had made up the sum of his early life, had supervened a disappointment which had at once cut to the quick his self-love, and destroyed his faith in his fellow-creatures. To the first maddening pain of the wound succeeded a fever of restlessness and recklessness. He fled from one scene of distraction to another ; and the fiend who possessed him led him panting over scorching tracks of delirious pleasure, and through wild regions of tumultuous passion, till he was ready to faint with exhaustion, and the spiced cup held to his lips nauseated him with an unspeakable loathing.

Oh, to forget, not only his pain, but himself! He plunged deeper and deeper into



the flood of sin ; but whether it might be that he was not a hero of the iron-sinewed school, with metallic moral fibre to correspond, he found no Fountain of Oblivion there. Like the wine drawn by Mephistopheles for the revellers in Auerbach's cellar, every drop he drew from that source turned to flame. Deeper and deeper he plunged, eagerly and more eagerly he drank. Health gave way, friends fell off, money failed ; post-obits ceased to move Hebrew hearts. Then it was wreck and ruin, imprisonment and disgrace, bodily sickness and mental despair. In the green valley beneath the rich cornfields at home there were hearts that ached—who can tell how they ached !

“How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is  
To have a thankless child!”

## CHAPTER III.

## A MOTHER'S BOSOM.

**I**T was in the long June days earlier in the same year than the scene in the Schwarzwald, which I attempted to bring before the reader in the last chapter, and some weeks after the return to Smokeham of Augustus Higginson.

Elfrida was still an inmate of St. Prisca's Home, though not a sister. After a year's trial, as Mr. Summerwood had foreseen, Miss Blagrove had decided that she had no vocation; in some respects to her regret, for though one of the children of the light, the

Lady Superior was by no means entirely without the wisdom belonging more especially to the children of the world. She knew well the effect Elfrida's appearance was calculated to produce, and the possible advantages which might on that account accrue to the Sisterhood. But it would not do. Every week's experience only made that more and more certain.

It had been a dreary time for Elfrida at Nunfield. Even the sense of spiritual security which she fondly fancied her sacrifice had permanently purchased, at times utterly failed her, and all the more completely that the Lady Superior seldom seemed pleased with her, and always kept her at a distance. She no longer occupied the position of a favourite guest, but was degraded to that of one of the subordinate inmates, with whom the reverend mother

was too great a personage to communicate personally. Miss Blagrove, though tender and forbearing in her ministrations to outsiders, was intolerant of inefficiency, and severe towards the failures of her assistants. Would it be harsh to suggest that probably the weaknesses of the one class served only to enhance the splendour of her merits, whereas the shortcomings of the other might appear to reflect some discredit upon herself? At all events, such shortcomings were not in her programme; and all efficient autocrats are intolerant of what frustrates their plans. Napoleon the Great was intolerant even of the wife whom he loved; and Henry the Eighth, was not he also—some say for the same reason—intolerant of the wives whom he—did not love?

But when it was communicated to the poor child that she was not to be retained

at Nunfield, despair seemed to take possession of her feeble soul. Where was she to go, and what was to become of her? It seemed to her, uncongenial as was the life of labour and self-denial prescribed in the "Home," that her salvation depended on her remaining there. She wept, entreated, even threw herself at Miss Blagrove's feet.

"Where am I to go? Mamma has never forgiven me. I dare not go home. I shall have no one there. What is to become of me?"

"You will have Mr. Summerwood for your director; and in as far as is consistent with higher claims, it is your duty to obey your parents—your duty altogether, I should say, Elfrida, as you are manifestly unfit for any higher life than that of the domestic circle."

This was the unkindest cut of all. What! had it all been in vain? Might she have blamelessly, even as her proper sphere, have led that life of flattery and luxury for which her nature yearned? Surely it was more hard for her to get to heaven than for other people?

And finding the Reverend Mother obdurate in spite of all her tears and humiliations, she gave utterance to this sentiment in a sort of pettish despair. As might have been expected, she met only with a severe reproof, Miss Blagrove's patience with any one so incompetent being well-nigh exhausted.

"Look here," she said, "if you were anyone else, I would order you prayer and meditation for a penance; but half your misery arises from idleness. I have some little comforts to send to a sick person in

Windlass Alley. Get on your bonnet and take them."

It was a long way to Windlass Alley—at least it seemed a very long way on that hot June day; and by the time Elfrida had executed her errand, she felt faint and tired, and in greater misery than ever. Probably the stifling heat of the atmosphere added to her depression. The morning had been cloudless, but for some hours past dense masses, like the consolidated smoke of a world of furnaces, had been coming up, with grand, lurid edges, in every direction, and now the whole city seemed overspread as by one vast tent of oppressive grimness. There was a portentous silence in the air—if air it could be called—the facilities it afforded for breathing seeming not much greater than those of an exhausted receiver.

Elfrida dragged along, listless in body

and limp in mind. All at once, on the hot, sunless pavement, fell right before her an enormous drop of rain, and simultaneously she heard overhead a heavy roll of thunder. She was now in a quieter and more genteel part of the town—not the fashionable district sacred to the mansions of the wealthy manufacturers and pit-owners, but a dull, quiet street, where the roll of well-hung carriages and the sight of liveried menials was as rare an occurrence as the bustle of drays and waggons, or the noisy, scolding clamour of the “slums.” It was inhabited by struggling gentility—married clerks, with small incomes and large families, daily governesses, and indigent widows of the better classes—the very quietest and least sensational of streets, as it was inhabited by the very quietest and least sensational of people. Hence it was that when Elfrida, in



alarm at the huge rain-drop, lifted up her head, she heard so plainly that prolonged, threatening roar.

The limp despondency of her mind was succeeded at once by nervous terror, sufficiently alive, but utterly bewildered. A thunderstorm, ever since that fatal occasion which had so changed the complexion of her whole life, had seemed to her like the voice of the Divine wrath, especially addressed to herself. In wild fear she now looked round for shelter and protection ; but there was no shop in that monotonous street. The dusty doors were uniformly closed, and had a sort of look as if they were never opened. And now the gigantic drops fell faster and thicker, a blinding flash of lightning seemed to her almost to graze her eyes, and the deep bass of the thunder became louder and more continued. The storm was not really so

alarming as Elfrida's fears led her to suppose; but she was not mistress of herself.

All at once, and in her extremest acme of terror, a door opened, just as she was passing. The building to which this door belonged stood two or three feet back from the rest of the street; and on glancing at it through the rain, it seemed to bear some resemblance to the end of a church jammed in between two houses. The door had the great mediæval hinge and nails of a church door. All at once Elfrida seemed to remember that somebody had once told her that there was a Roman Catholic chapel in this street, much frequented by the Irish. The opening of the door seemed to the frightened child like an interposition of Providence, and she eagerly pressed in for shelter and safety.

But inside the door she paused, soothed

and solemnised. Surely it was the court of Heaven!

There was no service going on, only one or two persons kneeling, and apparently absorbed in their devotions. The chapel was small, but very pretty, and pervaded by a religious gloom, heightened, probably, at that moment by the heavy cloud which brooded over the outside world. Above the high altar, on which tall tapers in massive silver candlesticks were burning, hung a picture of the crucifixion, every line of the beautiful, suffering countenance, and every muscle of the tortured limbs, full of power and expression. A side altar, dedicated to the Virgin, was gay with gifts (some of them rubbishy enough) and bright with flowers, conspicuous among which were the lilies, shining silvery white through the gloom, their faint, subtle scent mixing itself with the lin-

gering fragrance of the incense. The muffled roar of the thunder, and the low mesmeric whisper of a penitent at the confessional fell upon the ear, only as a sort of accompaniment to the solemnity of the place—a solemnity which persons might have been found to consider as somewhat somnolent, but which, to the frightened intruder, who had fled thither for shelter, seemed a foretaste of the Beatific Presence. Poor Elfrida ! when one comes to think of it, it was a strange idea of heaven ; and yet it included in it conceptions of rest and peace, as she understood these terms. The penitent now left the confessional, and as she passed Elfrida, who had only ventured a very few steps beyond the door, the latter asked timidly :

“Have you been confessing?”

“Yes, miss, sure!” returned the woman,

who was a very commonplace-looking personage, as if somewhat surprised at the question.

“And are you—are you happy?”

Her whole trembling soul was in the question. The woman looked yet more amazed, as she met the eager eyes of the young stranger. Perhaps she was struck by her beauty as well as by the peculiarity of her address.

“For sure, miss,” she answered. “The good father have given me absolution. All right.”

And with a cheerful countenance she left the church. The next instant, Elfrida, with a beating heart and a tremor in every nerve, was kneeling on the spot she had just quitted.

She felt she was taking a desperate step; but she must get relief or die. She tried to

peak, but her mouth was dry and her lips refused to form the syllables, as if she were in a bad dream.

“Are you ready, daughter?”

The words were spoken in a gentle, encouraging voice, which penetrated at once with power and healing to the wounded heart of the frightened girl. Elfrida—and in this respect she was certainly not peculiar—was at all times more accessible to manner than to reason. With quick breath and chattering teeth she could just manage to whisper:

“I want to confess my sins.”

“The ear of our most Holy Church is always open to the true penitent. Comfort and courage, my daughter!”

And comfort and courage the strong, tender tones seemed to carry to her heart. She was able to say:

"But I am not a Roman Catholic."

There was a slight sound, as if the announcement had been productive of some sensation in the mind of the Confessor. It was some seconds ere he spoke again. His voice was grave.

"Then why come here to confess?"

"Because I am miserable—you don't know how miserable, and I thought I might get some comfort—Oh! cannot you help me?"

"The Church cannot give absolution to one out of her communion."

"Then you cannot help me?—you will not listen to me? What am I to do? Nobody gives me any comfort. Oh! if you only knew how unhappy I am!"

"Surely it can never be wrong to comfort the unhappy," said the priest; but quite as much as if he were speaking to himself as to

his exceptional penitent. If the office of the confessional was from habit beginning with him to sink into a mere routine, to-day, at least, it seemed to have sprung into vitality.

"You will listen, then?" she said—"you will help me?"

"As I have told you, I cannot give you absolution, but I am ready to listen, as a fellow-creature to a fellow-creature, and give you truly such advice and comfort as may lie in my power."

The rich, firm voice conveyed again a sense of security to the little palpitating heart. Thus licensed, and as she went on forgetting her fear—at least of him—she poured out the whole unhappy history, not only of her external life, but of her inward sufferings, and what she conceived to be her sins—though that they were her real sins, or



her worst sins, is greatly to be doubted. She described minutely all that had happened that very day—the terror which had driven her into the chapel, the craving for consolation which had impelled her to the singular step she had taken.

At last she paused, out of breath, and in eager expectation. But no answer came. The oracle, like all Elfrida's oracles, seemed to be dumb. A sense of shame that she had so unveiled her heart to a stranger seized her timid soul. At last she asked, desponding,

“Must I go now?”

The priest started. Now, priests, after all, are but men; and men, unless it be the Pope, are at least personally fallible. And this priest, as we know, was at this minute acting only in his personal, and not in his priestly capacity. Perhaps that might have

been the reason why he looked in his little den, where the eye of the novelist, if no other, is privileged to penetrate, so very little infallible—so very little even as if he thought himself infallible. Infallibility, I should think—for, after all, I never met with it—does not display surprise or agitation, does not feel itself puzzled or moved to feelings it cannot control. He had listened to Elfrida's confession with a look of interest which seemed even painful. The veins on his forehead were swollen, and the hand uncovered by his robe shook visibly. One would almost have said, from his absent look, as she concluded her revelation, that he had forgotten she was there. But the deprecating voice recalled him.

“Miss Foxley,” he said, and the slight mannerism of the priest had changed altogether into the ordinary tone and address of

an English gentleman ; “ forgive me that I seemed even for an instant less mindful of your distress than I ought to have been. Let me assure you, I feel for your position altogether far more than it is possible for me to convey in words.”

There was a convincing sincerity in these words which was very re-assuring. He then went on :

“ You will no doubt be surprised to hear while I listened to you, my feelings were of a more personal character than those of mere sympathy. Your confession, or rather shall I call it the confidence you have reposed in me, connects itself in a strange manner with some of the incidents of my own life. It is one of those co-incidences, we call them, which are far commoner than we are apt to suppose. Leigh Wynford was once, not long ago, though those days seem like a past

state of existence, my intimate friend. He had the truest heart, the singlest mind I ever knew."

"Do you think he was a good young man? Mr. Summerwood seemed to think he was not. I am sure he was not at all pious, and he was so hard to me!"

"Hard! Wynford hard! But I can understand how he did not comprehend your difficulties. Certainly he never had any such himself."

"And now they say he has gone altogether to the bad. Papa has written me such kind letters since. He says he sees I was right now."

Again there was a long silence, and again it was broken by Elfrida.

"Do you blame me?"

"Blame you! I pity you from my heart."

“Then help me!—do help me! I will do whatever you bid me, if I may only have peace of conscience. Shall I become a Roman Catholic?”

Here was a tempting opportunity for the glory of making a convert! a glory to which zealous professors of all creeds in religion and philosophy are supposed to be alive, and Romish priests more especially so. But this priest, in becoming a priest, had not, for the advantage of his priesthood, sufficiently ceased to be a man. He answered:

“As far as I can see, Miss Foxley, in your painful circumstances the best thing for you, would be to return to your parents. There you will have time to study the difference between your faith and ours.”

“Oh, don’t send me away! Mr. Summerwood will be so angry! And I know he thinks your church a true church, for he

signed something to the Pope. Papa was so angry!"

"Dear Miss Foxley, such a step as you suggest ought not to be lightly taken—not merely on the impulse of a moment of feeling."

He spoke very gently, even with the tenderest compassion, for he must have been more or less than human if he had not felt the unconscious flattery of her appeal. Even Mr. Summerwood had not been adamant to such appeals, and the fibre of this priest's heart was to Mr. Summerwood's pretty nearly as a thread of cocoon silk to a thong of leather.

"It is not the impulse of a moment. I know now this is what I have longed for all my life. If you could only have given me absolution, I should have gone away happy. No other church can do that."

"At least I cannot answer you in a moment, Miss Foxley. I will write to you, if you will permit me."

"Thank you—thank you!" she said, fervently, and the long, strange interview was over.

Neither of them had seen each other then; but as the Confessor sat for a few seconds after she was gone, perfectly still, he could remember as vividly, as if it had just passed from his sight, the face of Elfrida Foxley.

The following day, as Elfrida was threading a narrow alley in the company of one of the sisters, they suddenly met a clergyman coming out of one of the most miserable of the cottages. Elfrida, even in the pre-occupied state of her mind, was struck either by his face or by a certain peculiarity of expression in his eyes, which rested

strangely on her own face for an instant, then were turned quickly away.

“Who is that, Sister Alice?”

“He’s the new Romish priest, belonging to the chapel of the Holy Cross, in Glum Street.”

From that moment that face became to Elfrida as the face of a god—that priest became for her the oracle of heaven. Silly, no doubt; but was she singular in her silliness?

“Mr. Blank thinks so and so, and Mr. Scratch says such and such a thing.” Did we never in the course of our experience hear such an assertion put forth, not only in religion, but in politics, as superseding all argument? Nay, may we not infer that Mr. Carlyle considers it a very good reason? And so it might be, if our hero were a real



hero, and not what the same author calls a  
"Simulacrum," or a "Phantasm." But who  
is to teach us to select our heroes?

## CHAPTER IV.

## PAST AND PRESENT.

**B**UT that dreaded life at home, where  
the

“Daily round and the common task”

were far indeed from furnishing all Elfrida asked, and where a sort of atmosphere of disapprobation seemed to chafe and depress her sensitive spirit, she was never to lead again.

The fortunes of the race of Foxley, so long on the wane, were about to set altogether at last. Strive and strain to the utmost of her ability—and her ability in that

line was great—it was too hard a battle even for Mrs. Foxley. Every year a little, and again a little, burden had been added to that already on the land ; or a field had been sold here, or some wood cut down there, to pay off a clamorous creditor. This could not go on for ever. Increasing debts and a diminishing income ! One knows what that must end in. Willesmere Court must come to the hammer.

The Colonel and his wife looked at each other with blank, dismayed faces.

“Could we not sell all the land and keep the house ? There is still the half-pay, and the pension for you when I am gone.”

“We could not live here and have enough to eat,” said the more practical wife ; “and it would fetch a higher price if the house went too. Oh ! Geoffrey, dear, it has been such hard work already !” and the tears, so

long repressed by the poor brave heart, forced themselves into her eyes at last.

Then, indeed, when he saw his wife weep over their misfortunes, instead of setting about to repair them, it seemed to the Colonel all was over. For some seconds he sat quite silent, and looking almost bewildered ; then he said, in a dejected tone : " Well, let it go," and rising slowly, left the room.

It was a relief to Mrs. Foxley, in spite of all the trying scenes there remained to go through—an immense relief. They would lay down the carriage and the county dignity, and take a pretty cottage near some town. She knew she could manage to live on the half-pay then. The losing battle she had been fighting for the last twelve months had nearly worn her out. It had been so different from the earlier days, when she

had fought with a fair hope of victory. And though "Geoffrey" would feel it at first, surely he would be happier too! Like most of us, Mrs. Foxley calculated on the feelings of others from a reference to her own.

When the Colonel had anything to do he did it at once, the more especially if it was of a disagreeable nature. Now that he had fairly made up his mind to part with Willesmere Court, he seemed in a hurry to have it all done and over. He spent no time in last visits and lingering farewells. The sight of all the old familiar objects, even of those especial localities connected with the history of his race—such as that particular loop-hole whence Sir Geoffrey the Marksman, with a cloth-yard shaft, had shot a Welsh knight right through the brain at some distance altogether incredible; the

chamber where Edward the First had slept; even his own favourite haunts, the old rookery, the lime-tree seat by the moat—seemed painful to him now. He had never, indeed, been quite himself since the breaking off of his daughter's engagement with the son of his old friend. He had been so proud, so happy, in the prospect. It was as if the bleak, rainy day of life were about to close in the calm of a golden sunset. Now dreary, storm-laden clouds were rising around. The night came fast, and there would be no stars. He should leave Elfrida poor and friendless. He should never see her honoured and cherished.

It had been the crowning bitterness of his life, but he had never reproached her.

“If she does not love the young man, it is less dishonourable to break it off than to marry him. She was a little dazzled, I fear;

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It had been the crowning bitterness of his life, but he had never reproached her.

“If she does not love the young man, it is less dishonourable to break it off than to marry him. She was a little dazzled, I fear;

and so were we, Rose. We should have made her take time."

But Rose would neither reproach herself nor her husband. In her heart she was angry with her daughter, and at times, when she beheld her husband's downcast bearing and sad, altered looks, even exasperated. For his sake only she smothered her indignation.

Now he sat mostly indoors, and wrote letters, and when he was not writing he had often a book lying open before him. He spoke little to anyone, and though he never complained, he became daily thinner and more haggard. "He will be better," hoped Mrs. Foxley, "when it is all over." She was very busy, having all sorts of arrangements to make, and had, as she said herself, "no time then to be miserable."

And so it was all over. The place was

sold, and there was no longer a Foxley of Willesmere Court. The purchaser was a nouveau riche, a prosperous manufacturer at Smokeham, a town in the next county. The only remark the Colonel made was—"The world is being turned upside down fast enough." But to Mrs. Foxley the main point was that he had paid a good price. The new proprietor, who had never seen the place, the purchase having been effected through an agent, proposed, through him also, to come down and look at his new property on any day that might be convenient for the Colonel, in whose possession it was to remain till Michaelmas. He also inquired if there was an inn in the place, where he could obtain refreshment and a bed.

"Ask the man here, Rose," said the Colonel. "We shall surely be able to en-

ture his vulgarity for one day. Willesmere Court has never been an inhospitable house, and it shall not be as long as I am master."

The Colonel had not spoken so like himself for many a day. His wife, even amid her painful calculations as to what it would cost to entertain the Higginsons, felt a gleam of satisfaction at this manifestation of his old spirit. She, too, shrank from encountering the vulgarity of the "new people," for she had heard they were very vulgar.

It was on the middle of a day towards the end of August that a fly and pair drew up at the footbridge leading across the moat to the gateway in the old Norman wall, beneath which Elfrida Foxley stood when she bade adieu to Leigh Wynford.

A broad, handsome, honest, by no means lady-like face, surmounted by a bonnet, concentrating in itself an astonishing amount of

elaborate millinery, was thrust out of the window of the fly.

"Is this the place? I thought it 'ud 'a been a much finer place. Mr. 'Igginson, my dear, this ain't to compare with Belvidere Mansion. It ain't near so big, and I'm sure that tower ain't to be named with hour gazebo."

"Oh! we'll soon put all that to rights. This is a real old place, they tell me. A deal may be done with plenty of the needful."

"So hinconvenient 'aving to cross this ditch place—what do you call it? I wonder hanybody hever made such a thing! What could it 'ave been for now?"

Mr. Higginson had not had much more education than his wife; but he had a more inquiring mind, and had done more to repair its deficiencies.



"That ditch, as you call it—it ain't really much better—but its proper name is a moat, was used to defend the place long ago in times of war; and them holes—" (Mr. Higginson could speak grammar, but, in addressing his wife, it always seemed more affectionate and familiar not to be over-particular)—"were for shooting arrows from."

"Law!" said Mrs. Higginson, with a face of wonder.

"Fancy 'em fighting with bows and arrows!" added her husband, rather contemptuously.

He found it, in fact, rather difficult to believe that the people of those remote times, when "Armstrongs" and needle-guns were as yet undreamt of, and paper-bags, even of the rudest construction, probably unknown, were anything better than a kind of grown-up children.

“And ’ad we hever a war in England? I thought it was only in France and Proosha, and them foreign places, they had wars.”

But the inner door was now open, and the Colonel, in his old-fashioned way, received his unwelcome guests in the hall. Stately and self-possessed—what Mr. Higginson stigmatised in his own mind as “grand”—there was something in his courtesy which gave the successful man an unwonted feeling of discomfort. But he was not going to give way to such a feeling as that—not he! He had got on by being plucky, and his pluck was not going to desert him now. He fancied the Colonel would like to hear he was pleased with his bargain, just as he used to like a compliment from a new customer on his paper-bags.

“Very pretty old place; but my wife don’t like the moat. *Rayther* unhealthy—

the Sanitary Commissioners would say. Science, sir, has made wonderful strides since that was hollowed out. But we can have it filled up—nice smooth lawn, with statues and urns, or something pretty of that sort.”

The attempted smile on the Colonel's face was a mere spasmodic twitch, which left behind a look so pained and dreary that even Mr. Higginson, pre-occupied as he was with noting the capabilities of his new purchase, was made uncomfortable by it, and all the more that he was unconscious of the cause. Mrs. Foxley saw at a glance how it all was—saw even that Mr. Higginson had intended to be kind, for plain sense and a kind heart give considerable insight.

They were now in the drawing-room, and calling him to the end window, with the curtains in embroidered birds, on pretext of

showing him the view, she whispered hurriedly :

“Don’t say anything about the place to my husband. It breaks his heart to leave it ; and anything——”

But she stopped. Mr. Higginson merely looked in her face and nodded. The hint was quite a relief to him ; and Mrs. Foxley was grateful to her guest that he had not made an apology, and acknowledged in her heart that he did possess one kind of good breeding.

She now took Mrs. Higginson upstairs, to lay aside the mass of flowers and lace which she called her bonnet. Here the two women fell into conversation, and, in spite of the difference in their circumstances, began to like each other. The well-born hostess, nurtured in refinement, and whose life had been one long journey down-hill, was able to

find some common ground even with the guest who, beginning at one of the lowest rounds of the social ladder, had found herself, without much effort of her own, raised step by step, till the top seemed not unattainable, if not in her own person, at least in that of her children. It was of course Mrs. Foxley who broke the ice. She confessed candidly, but not complainingly, how nothing but necessity would ever have induced them to leave Willesmere. She mentioned some of her favourite poor, and bespoke for them the consideration of the new lady.

“Certainly—certainly—any one you think well of. And is there nothing else now I can do?”

Mrs. Foxley was silent for a minute; then she said, in an altered tone,

“There is a grave in the churchyard. For

twenty years I have kept the flowers there planted and watered."

"And so they shall be—so they shall," said Mrs. Higginson, with a face which asked a question, though her long tongue did not.

"The only boy I ever had was buried there twenty years ago. Perhaps if he had lived——"

"Law, now! a boy!—and I have an only boy too! The finest of flowers shall grow there. It do seem hard—it do seem very hard!"

And Mrs. Higginson could not avoid contrasting the fate of this poor lady with her own.

"I do sometimes feel as if it had been hard; but I have had much that has been pleasant in my life too." She tried to speak cheerfully, but her eyes were bright with tears.

Mrs. Higginson's kindness of heart now got the better of her dread of committing a conventional solecism. She took her hostess's hand, and, looking into her face with her kind, honest eyes, said,

"Now, could not we help you a bit? It seems, coming here and all that, as if we had a right to. I should take it so kind if you would let us. You are not too proud, I am sure."

Too proud! There might have been a time, long ago, when she would have been too proud. She was not sure. Now she burst into tears. It was such a relief to be able to shed them at last. This stranger, in spite of her vulgarity, was so kind!

"Indeed, Mrs. Higginson, when I think you can help me, I will ask you; and, in the meantime, you have comforted me very much."

"Well, now, the like o' that! And a real born lady like you!" said the paper-bag maker's wife, flattered and excited, and revealing herself consequently rather more than usual.

"But don't say anything, or let your husband say anything to the Colonel. Things come far harder on him than on me. And it is no wonder."

"Law now!" and "well, to be sure!" in a sympathising tone, was all that Mrs. Higginson found to say in rejoinder; for she did not quite see why it should be so much harder for the Colonel, but fancied it might be owing to her ignorance of the notions of people in that rank of life.

Mrs. Foxley, in the meantime, bethinking herself that her new friend had said she had a son, began to ask about her children; and on this theme Mrs. Higginson waxed elo-



quent. Before the next morning, when the Higginsons departed, the two women had made many further exchanges of confidence, and parted with mutual regard. Not so the Colonel and Mr. Higginson. The latter, acting on Mrs. Foxley's hint, had scrupulously, perhaps too scrupulously, refrained from making the place a subject of conversation; but what he had already said rankled in the Colonel's mind. The man's whole appearance and manners were an offence to him. He was even worse than he had expected. Debarred from conversation on the only personal matter they had in common, and ignorant in literature, Mr. Higginson naturally talked of such questions of the days as most interested himself; school-boards, modern inventions for the diminution of labour, and the increase of material prosperity, which he appeared to think synonymous with the well-

being of the country ; and not only were his views on all these subjects actually revolting to the Colonel, but they were enunciated as if they were self-evident axioms, which no sane man would think of contradicting. The Colonel did not contradict them. He only felt, with a deep despondency, that his day was gone by—that it was all over in this world with the good old times, when

“The great man helped the poor,  
And the poor man loved the great.”

Now it was everyone for himself—rates instead of charity, grumbling instead of gratitude ; and it appeared to him that steam-engines, sewing-machines, and such like, were somehow or other at the bottom of it.

“Next year, Rose,” he said, “I should not wonder if the aspen meadow were mown by the hay-devil. Poor old Tom .

Weevin and Eli Jones, what will become of them, with the bread taken out of their mouths in their old age ?”

“Mrs. Higginson has promised to see to them.”

“See to them! See they are put into one of the best wards in the Union, I dare say! Poor old fellows! They should not have wanted their day’s wages from me, as long as they could hold a scythe; and their retiring pension afterwards—that is, if I had had it to give, God help me! And the man talks about education, and he never heard either of Horace or Homer!”

Mr. Higginson in the train was also making his wife his confidante.

“Stuck-up, prejudiced old fool!—rotten, my dear, rotten as that old yew-tree we passed on the green! And as to going back to the days of our forefathers, what fore-

fathers does he mean?—them as painted themselves blue as I have been told, and hadn't shirts to their backs? And as to employing a set of lazy louts to do the work that is done a thousand times better by a machine, can there be a greater waste of capital? Look at that old Colonel himself, and see what such folly brings a man to? Give a man education in spite of himself, a useful education, plenty arithmetic, mechanics, and such like, and no nonsense of Greek and Latin, unless he can afford it, like our Gus, and he'll do better for himself a deal with his brains than he would ever have done with his hands. A fair start for every man, and the devil take the hindmost!"

"Hush—sh—sh!" said Mrs. Higginson, shocked, not at the sentiment, but at the manner of its expression. She was not

much in the habit of calling in question the soundness of her husband's sentiments in such matters. She credited him rather with the profoundest wisdom. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, Mrs. Higginson knew, if she knew no other language but her own, and even that not too brilliantly ; and were not Belvidere Mansion, the fine clothes and the fine carriages, so many unanswerable arguments in her husband's favour ? In her eyes he was the greatest of men. For reasons based on a similar unconscious school of philosophy, it may have been perhaps that Mrs. Foxley did not feel quite so confident of the soundness of her husband's theory of life.

In those rare moments of leisure when she had time to think it possible she might be a martyr, it was no doubt a drawback to the enjoyment which ought to have been

produced by the reflection that her whole heart was not in the cause. Would it not have been better, five and twenty years ago, when they were young, if her Geoffrey had turned his hand to something? Might it not even have been better to have made paper bags? Plenty of money was a pleasant thing. Or, at least, the want of it was a bitter one.

## CHAPTER V.

## REAPING THE WHIRLWIND.

TOWARDS the close of a day in harvest, a pedestrian traveller might have been seen walking slowly along a country road in the uplands or wolds of Bloomshire. These uplands, or wolds, or downs, of which there are several in different parts in England, were, in the present instance, at least, formed by a table-land, intersected by narrow valleys, at the bottom of which flashed the bright and rapid streams to which they (the valleys) probably owed their existence. A very world of corn

was that table-land, scarcely broken by a hedge or tree. Only on the horizon was to be seen a vague blue strip, which looked like the distant sea, but was, in reality, the level land of Bloomshire, and other neighbouring counties. Now many persons might have thought the prospect I have here described neither picturesque nor poetical, nor interesting to any eye save that perhaps of a farmer, or a politician of that species of the utilitarian class, which seems to have forgotten that man does not live by bread alone. But the pedestrian traveller above mentioned was apparently not of the opinion of such persons. To him, apparently, this fertile desert was beautiful. He looked at it as a lover looks at his mistress, or as a patriot beholds his fatherland, or—in observing him more narrowly—as an exile taking his last look of home.



It was still daylight, though the sun was set, and there was not a cloud in the sky, which stretched all round, far as the sight could reach, like a vast tent, beheld by the spectator from a wide level platform in the midst. There was to-night no pomp of sunset colouring, no trailing gold, or towering purple. A light grey mist had risen from the bed of the sun, making the western sky as cold and pale as the opposite east. The heavens were as monotonous as the earth—an endless, yellow expanse below : above, an infinity of pale blue !—an effect to some minds, perhaps, simply uninteresting ; to others, lonely, oppressive, or filling the heart with a sense of immensity, and the eyes, with those tears which spring

“ From the depths of some divine despair.”

The pedestrian traveller stood long, turn-

ing round and round to gaze, as if his eye could not be satisfied with seeing.

As he continued to devour it with his looks, a brighter glow began to manifest itself in the east, steadily increasing in intensity, till a broad-disked moon rose over the low, distant horizon. It could hardly be said to add light to the scene, for the daylight as yet swallowed up its fainter beams. It only added another feature of solitude and majesty, as well as that silence of motion which is infinitely more expressive than the silence of rest.

It had risen some apparent yard into the sky, and the daylight was a shade or two paler, when the traveller turned round, walking quickly along the road. He had not gone far when an abrupt turn presented a very different scene. All at once the road dipped down into one of those valleys

which from the table-land of the wolds are all but invisible.

His eye sought for and rested on a well-sized country house, situated at the widest part of the valley, where two streams met. It was an old and time-honoured, though hardly ancient structure, built of grey stone, with shallow, mullioned oriels, round which clung masses of ivy. The mountain streams flashed through the soft green lawns, and past

*"Many an oak that grew thereby."*

A park of some magnitude extended itself along the green levels by the two streams, and up the wooded slopes, which shut in the "happy valley" from the wide, windy world of the wolds. Even now you could see the deer in groups, masculine and feminine, under the oaks, and the rooks were flying slowly home for the night to

the rookery on the hill behind the house.

Up a little vista beyond, the smoke rose above the trees from the cottage chimneys, and from a little Norman tower which peeped through the foliage a bell was now tolling the curfew. It might not, perhaps, have been a very fine bell, but it harmonized with the spirit of the place—

“A haunt of ancient peace,”

you would have said, if indeed there be such a haunt on this football of Destiny, our mother earth, in whose lap, however, we find rest at last.

The pedestrian traveller remained long standing. He was quite a young man—a gentleman, you would have said, certainly, in spite of his shabby dress and dusty, travel-stained look. Of course we know that gentlemen—especially English gentlemen—often are shabby, dusty, and travel-

stained, and even take a pride in being so, more especially when they have a favourable opportunity for astounding the natives of other European countries with the amount of travel-stains, dust, and shabbiness, in the shape of battered hats, muddy trousers, and tumbled puggrees they can support, yet maintain the aspect of the "upper classes." But then these battered hats are all the "last thing;" these muddy trousers the newest cut for touring purposes. An old dress-coat, or even a rather threadbare, fashionable ditto suit, for a loungeur in the Park or the Zoo, would not be shabbiness of the desirable genus. It was somewhat this class of shabbiness, however, that the appearance of the traveller bespoke.

His dress was not old, to judge by the cut, which was modern enough, and the fit was good. It looked as if it had been origin-

ally made for the wearer, but it was worn, not spoilt, which is the only orthodox form of shabbiness to the fashionably-constituted male mind. One of his boots, too, had a split in the side, and the sole of the other was loose at the heel. There could be no mistake—his shabbiness was the shabbiness of poverty. He looked, too, as if he had been ill. His cheek was hollow, and his eyes were jaded and unnaturally big. It was a face full of feeling, perhaps of passion—not a happy face, then, although it looked as if it might well have been a happy one under more favourable circumstances.

In the same manner as he had stared at the wolds, he now fixed his eyes on that narrower and more home-like view, as if he would mingle his very soul with it. Thus he remained till quite visibly the moon began to cast the shadow of the tree behind which he

stood upon the road. Then he moved on again, down the steep descent into the valley. By a footpath leading partly across the meadows, and partly through a wood, he found himself in a thicket of ornamental trees and shrubs which flanked the mansion he had been looking at from the heights above.

A lady and gentleman were seated together on a garden-seat on the lawn, in front of the house. They were facing the stream, and the heights from which the traveller had descended, and had their backs to the concealed position in which he had now placed himself. The daylight was nearly gone, and the moon, no longer broad-disked and yellow, but shrunken in her sphere, and whiter in her light, began to tip the tree-tops with silver, and to gem with diamonds the ripples in the stream. The lady and gentleman were sitting quite silent at first; then

the latter began to speak, and the lurking pedestrian held his breath to listen. His heart beat so fast that it seemed to him as if he could not hear for the noise it made. But he did hear, for there was not a breath of wind. A sort of enchanted stillness pervaded earth and sky, and seemed almost to magnify the sound of the speaker's voice. But he only spoke to propose going into the house.

"The dew is very heavy," he said, "and you have no shawl. You will catch cold."

"As you like, dear." And the lady's tone was one of undisguised dejection. "It does not signify much, Henry. I sometimes wish I could be very ill." And laying her head on his shoulder, she burst into tears. Her husband kissed her, and then, springing to his feet, he cried vehemently,

"I wish to God he had never been born!"

"Don't say that, Henry. Oh! don't say



that! He was so pretty and good—such a noble boy! And everybody admired him. But,” she added, in a lower tone, “that time when he had the scarlet fever, when—you remember how anxious we were—I sometimes think now we were too anxious, and that for himself it might have been better——”

A shudder ran through her frame—the accompaniment of a yet more hysterical fit of weeping. Her husband drew her arm within his, and led her tenderly into the house. Her face, intended by nature for smiling complacency, was heart-sunk and tear-bedewed; that of her companion was dark and stern.

The stranger's eyes followed them, as if fascinated—every feature of his face white and rigid.

Then, as he heard the door close, he threw

himself upon the ground, and huge sobs burst from his heaving chest, and shook his strong young frame.

Who can tell—for one can but guess—what useless regret, what bitter humiliation, what passionate repentance, what mighty yearning filled his heart?

At last he became calmer. Bending down again,—for this youth, as the reader has already perceived, was extravagant in all his actions,—he kissed the soil on which he had been standing, and in articulate words he made this vow—

“I will never see them again till they can look on me as a son of whom they need not be ashamed. And, O God!” he added, the vow becoming a passionate prayer, “grant it may be before they die!”

## CHAPTER VI.

MRS. HIGGINSON IS A HEROINE.

IT was the day after the Higginsons' return from Willesmere Court. The whole family, including Augustus, were assembled in the drawing-room before dinner. Miss Godfrey did not, however, make one of the circle. It was her time for writing letters or reading, and for being especially quiet and comfortable amid the luxuries of her own pleasant apartment.

It was a warm pleasant evening, about sunset. All the windows were open. Gorgeous beyond description were the beds in

the smooth velvet pile of the lawn, thick set, as the pattern of a carpet, with flowers, the brilliancy of their colours being almost intolerable to the sight. Most people—all the Smokeham people—said they “never had seen such a garden—such a Paradise;” but there were a few eccentric persons, Helen Godfrey among the number, in whose notions of beauty, variety, and repose were essential elements, who would have preferred even a break or an imperfection to that unbroken blaze of colour which clamoured so loudly for applause, and was, to the imagination, so utterly barren of suggestion. However it may be with “a primrose by the river’s brim,” certainly in a garden entirely composed of bedded-out greenhouse plants, arranged in a kaleidoscope pattern, there lie no “thoughts too deep for tears.”

Near one of the windows, in an easy-chair, sat Mrs. Higginson, her husband and children assembled around her in various lounging attitudes. She herself seemed to-night more than usually the centre of the family group. And, when one came to look at her, there was something a little unusual in her appearance. The everlasting wool-work, which seemed a part of herself—at least in her own drawing-room—was laid aside; she looked, for her, a little pale, was somewhat nervous and shaky, and had her arm in a sling.

The fact was, Mrs. Higginson had had an accident—a railway accident! It had not, however, been a grand smash, but only a little private personal accident of her own. On arriving at the Puddle Valley Junction, where passengers changed for Smokeham, Mrs. Higginson (who was usually very care-

ful, but now fancied the train had stopped), seeing the Smokeham train fussing and panting, as if threatening to be off without her, imprudently hastened to step down on the platform—a long wide step at the Puddle Valley Junction. At the most inauspicious moment the train made one of those sudden spasmodic jerks to which trains are prone ; and poor, unwieldy, terrified Mrs. Higginson would have been thrown down between the carriages and the platform, where she would certainly have lost her limbs, if not her life, had not a fellow-passenger, who had just got out of a neighbouring third-class carriage, fortunately rescued her. Thanks to his promptitude and presence of mind, she escaped with no further damage than spraining her left wrist. Her “preserver” had grazed rather severely his own right hand.

This is how it came to pass that Mrs. Higginson was a sort of heroine to-night in her family circle, where, though sometimes a little ashamed of her, they all really loved her.

"Only think of poor mumsey!" said Augustus patronisingly, but not without feeling. He always patronised his mother, in an affectionate way—a sort of patronage which was very gratifying to her. "What should we do without our mumsey, or with a poor mumsey with no legs."

He spoke jestingly; but as he spoke he rose and kissed her with real feeling. Then he asked, Briton-like, to cover the embarrassment of that little display of tenderness:

"But what are we to do for the hero that rescued the mumsey? Why did you not invite him to dinner, father?" Augustus had an idea that it was at once genteel, and ac-

according to the usages of the primitive church, to address his parent by his formal title.

“Ask him to dinner!” cried Ethel, throwing back her haughty head; “ask a common man travelling third-class to dinner! Give him five pounds, or ten pounds, or whatever more he may consider handsome remuneration. That would be much pleasanter both for him and for us.”

“What have you done, my dear?” said Mrs. Higginson. “He do howe him a deal, and should like ’im to be ’andsomely treated.”

“Well, I asked him yesterday, as he said he was going to Smokeham, to call at the counting-house to-day. At first he did not seem inclined to come; but afterwards he said he would, and he came.”

“Well?” said Ethel.

“Well, Miss Ethelind! I offered him ten



pounds, and he would not have it. And then I asked him to dinner. So you see I have obeyed the commands of the young folks, as becomes a well-trained governor, all the same as if they had been given in time."

Mr. Higginson laughed loud, as he generally did when he thought he had said anything clever.

"And did he decline that too?" asked Ethel

"He did."

"I am sure there he was right, for no doubt a man of his class would not have felt himself quite comfortable at our table. What a blessing he did not come!"

"Well, I think the reason he did not come was because he had not a decent coat to put on. He did not look like a working man; more like one of the shabby-genteel order that call to ask servants to sub-

scribe to illustrated Bibles, and such like."

"Why did he not take the ten pounds, then? I suppose he wanted something else!" Ethel said, with a sort of scornful nonchalance, as if the whole affair was rather beneath her.

"Well, now, he did want something else, and you are a clever one, Ethel. But, after all, he only wanted what all men ought to want. He wanted work."

"A situation in your counting-house would no doubt be vastly more valuable than ten pounds."

"True, Ethel," said her father, regarding her with pride; "still it would only be worth more if he could fill it. So I told him, and that I should discharge him if he did not suit, and consider the obligation I was under to him cancelled. To tell the truth, I suspected him, from his cut altogether, to be

a chap that had gone to the bad, and wanted to pull up and start afresh."

"Hand you'll give 'im ha chance. You could not do less, John, hi'm sure."

"I have given him a chance, for my old woman's sake," said Mr. Higginson. "I have put him on as a sort of supernumerary clerk, at a low salary, and if he does well, I may advance him. But I don't expect it."

"And was he grateful?" asked Ethel.

"He said, 'Thank you, sir. I hope to show my gratitude to you by faithful service;' but, on my word, I can't tell you how I felt when he said it—as if he was the master, and I was the servant."

"Perhaps he has been on the stage," suggested Augustus.

"I hope he won't break into the strong box," remarked Ethel, with lofty languor.

For an instant Mrs. Higginson looked alarmed ; but she quickly recovered herself.

“ You wouldn’t ha’ said so, Ethel, if you had seen him. He was a kind, honest-faced lad, and if it had not been for him, I might not have been sitting here.”

“ True, mumsey, true,” said Augustus ;  
“ I shall ask him to dine at my lodgings some day, for your sake.”

When Helen joined the family party in the drawing-room after dinner, Mrs. Higginson told her eagerly about Mr. Higginson having given the young man who had been of such service to her at the Puddle Valley Junction, a situation. Helen had already heard many times over from the good lady herself a detailed narrative of his exploit, and, to speak the truth, was a little tired both of it and him, though sincerely rejoiced at the safety of her kind patroness.

"It is very good of Mr. Higginson, I am sure," she said; "for, after all, what did he do that any man worthy the name of a man would not have done?"

"That was just what he said himself," said Mr. Higginson, senior—"that he did not want to be paid for it—that he wanted work, and would endeavour to serve me well in whatever capacity I should try him."

"Just the sort of grand ideas to suit you, Miss Godfrey," said Augustus; "and grand actions, too, to correspond. The new clerk, depend upon it, is just the sort of fellow you admire."

And then Mr. Augustus Higginson, as he had frequently done before, endeavoured to engage the governess in a little friendly banter. Their chat was often very lively—so lively that it at times approached a dispute; but as it was always carried on

aloud, and in the presence of the whole family, there could be no danger in it.

Mr. Higginson had long ceased to have any uncomfortable apprehensions. It was very natural, after all, for "Gus" to like to talk to a pretty girl; but he was evidently upon honour, never seeking her alone, never making love to her; and she as evidently understood it perfectly. Miss Godfrey was the most sensible of girls.

Augustus Higginson was, in fact, quite as firmly resolved as his sister Ethelind that his marriage should advance his social position. Had one, however, been forced to "take the odds" in favour of either of them adhering to their resolution, one would certainly have chosen Ethelind. She was neither so amiable nor so easily flattered as her brother; and her selfishness was much franker and more decided. She

had no idea of wasting her time and talents in senseless flirtations, which could come to nothing ; whereas he was never quite happy unless he was the main object of every young lady with whom he might chance to be in the room. He fancied he had now achieved that position with regard to Miss Godfrey, and was consequently mentally at rest. Under such circumstances, he might have neglected her altogether, had it not been for her seeming indifference to such neglect ; and indifference he could not brook.

This was the rock ahead of Augustus Higginson.

## CHAPTER VII.

## INFALLIBILITY BEHIND THE SCENES.

THE priest to whom Elfrida had made her singular confession had not been long at Smokeham. Except the poor Irish, there were not very many Roman Catholics in Smokeham. The few belonging to the upper classes attended a larger and handsomer church, situated in a much more fashionable locality than the church of the Holy Cross, which had only been established as a mission outpost for two or three years—an old Quaker meeting-house having been ecclesiasticised, beautified, and conse-



crated for the purpose. This priest was only the second who had served the chapel, and he had been but a few weeks in the place when the daily humdrum of his duties had been thus strangely invaded. I have already hinted that to the eye of the novelist and his readers, privileged to have a peep even into the arcanum of the confessional, he had not altogether comported himself with the godlike demeanour befitting a sprig of infallibility.

Nor did he look any more infallible now as he sat alone in the little parlour of his lodgings, in an old leather arm-chair, by a table on which lay open a large portable writing-desk lined with green baize; and scattered about, several books, of a physiognomy suggestive of anything rather than "light reading." The room was a small

square upstairs-apartment, in a block of semi-suburban buildings, not facing any street, but communicating with the nearest thoroughfare, by one or two narrow passages. The window commanded a view of market gardens, with the rows of peas, beds of strawberries, thin-leaved apple trees, débris of cabbage leaves, bundles of sticks, and other features which usually belong to the scene. In the foreground was the narrow paved path, separated from the garden by a paling, which led up to the doors of the houses. In the distance—that is to say, across the tract of gardens—was to be discerned, through the sparse leafage, another row of houses, which, to judge by the peeps of featureless frontage and shallow roofing, red, with irregular streams and splashes of bluish gas-tar, were a counterpart of those

with one of which we are now concerned.

The interior of the room occupied by the priest, showed evidently that it was the best parlour of the establishment. The houses being new, the woodwork was not yet painted, but there was a very striking paper on the walls; red roses and blue convolvi stretching their necks out of brown gothic windows, on an apple-green background, and a "'ansome" (as the ladlady said) square of Kidderminster carpet on the floor. Three patterns of this carpet (green and yellow leaves of the genus trifolium—species undiscovered by botanists—twisting about at their own sweet will, or that of the weaver, among brown hexagons) stretched across the floor. A view of the west front of a cathedral, some likenesses—all photographs, and evidently belonging to the lodger,

like the desk, table, and arm-chair, were the only ornaments the room contained, except a green and white china poodle-dog, at each end of the mantelshelf, and a white and gilt vase, somewhat of the shape of a squashed cornucopia, in the centre.

The priest, I have said, did not look at all infallible. On the contrary, he looked, if not "hope-lifted," certainly "doubt depressed," perhaps even

"Tried, troubled, tempted,"—

all aspects unbecoming infallibility.

He was a young man, dark-complexioned, with a face marked with lines of thought, painful thought, one would have said—beyond his years. Dark eyes he had, set far back in his head, which sent forth occasional flashes of meaning or sentiment, but were usually quiescent, and hidden behind very long, thick eyelashes. His fore-

head was full rather than broad, with an habitual expression of anxiety, one would have said; and at this moment it was ploughed into absolute wrinkles.

He was thinking over the professional adventure of the previous afternoon, and thinking of it with feelings one would hardly have expected either from a young man or a priest. The main object of a priest's existence is supposed to be to make proselytes; and, of a mission-church, is not proselytism the very *raison d'être*? Nevertheless, this priest was by no means uplifted at the prospect of making a proselyte thus thrust upon him. And such a proselyte! He was quite aware of the *éclat* that would accrue, both to the church and to himself, by making a convert of Elfrida's birth, position, and beauty. And he not only understood, but appreciated such *éclat*. By nature he was

ambitious and fond of applause. But there was something within him which shrunk, in this case, at least, from the consequences of such a conversion. He could not choose but think of the domestic dissension it might cause, the miseries and loneliness it might inflict on the poor girl herself. He perceived clearly enough that she had no opinions or convictions whatever. She was only weak and unhappy, and wanted comfort and support. A ritualist parson, an evangelical preacher, anyone who had heart enough to be tender to her, and confidence enough to be perfectly unflinching in his assurances, could give her what she needed. Why then expose her, this tender, shrinking minosa, to all the wretchedness of a change of faith? These were strange reflections for a Romish priest, who ought to have believed that there was no salvation out of the One Church—

who had indeed believed there was none for himself beyond her pale. But it might have been a lingering taint of the Protestantism in which he had been educated, that he had an ineradicable notion that people should understand what they profess to believe, and more especially when they must make sacrifices for their belief. He was not at all an ideal priest.

And therefore one would say the more likely in his feelings to approach the mere man. Now, the mere man, as we know; even the priestly man, for the Rector of Willesmere, for instance, came nearer the species priest, in the classification of the genus, than did this real tonsured son of the Roman hierarchy, was apt to be captivated by the beauty and the helplessness of Elfrida Foxley. As a mere man this priest felt the charm of her

whole nature quite as strongly as either Mr. Summerwood or Leigh Wynford ; and inas-much as he had more self-knowledge than either of these two, he was from the begin-ning more conscious of what it was that charmed him.

To the natural man, it seemed to him nothing could be so sweet as to receive the confidences of that innocent heart. Sins, poor child ! Did not her microscopic sins shine almost with the purity of Arctic snow beside the pretentious virtues of many a saint ? To have that soft, innocent face raised to his in touching supplication, in un-wavering dependence, would it not be, if not a foretaste of Heaven, at least a remin-iscence of Paradise ? And to be privileged to soothe that confiding heart, to uphold that shrinking spirit—ah !

The priest thought of what might have



been, of the Anglican parsonage, the home-love, the—— He remembered once before to have had this picture before his eyes, when the Irrevocable had not as yet intervened between him and it. Now, it only might have been. He knew how bitterly unprofitable—how far worse than unprofitable it is to think of what might have been. His business was to think of what might yet be.

I am far from saying that the priest was unlike other men in having these feelings; but he was unlike most quite young men in his ready consciousness of them. Few men are so self-conscious—few so conscientiously close in their self-scrutiny. I am aware that, to many minds, this may seem great praise. “Know thyself,” &c. One might bring down a whole flood of proverbial wisdom in favour of the mental

constitution I have described. Notwithstanding, and humbly begging the proverbial wisdom's pardon, I take leave to doubt there being anything very admirable in any excessive form of self-occupation. Are not self-knowledge and self-scrutiny but forms of egotism ?

Therefore, instead of yielding immediately to the impulse which would have urged him to comfort Elfrida and indulge himself, a vision opened upon him of all the avenues to temptation for himself, and danger to her, to which this pleasant and natural course of conduct might lead. On the other hand, his feelings of chivalry as a gentleman (and though he was a priest, he could not forget he was a gentleman) forbade him to disown her appeal. And were he, on account of any danger to himself, to turn a deaf ear to the call of the least or the lowest, would

he not also be a false shepherd, a craven priest? Ought he not, even for his flock's sake, to be willing to be Anathema Maranatha?

Elfrida must not be given up. He would lend her books. But what books? Not surely books of controversy, such as had fascinated himself, while they made him miserable. To give her such books, would be but giving her a stone when she had asked for bread. No, he must lend her books of comfort and consolation. Faber's works perhaps; stories of pious and holy women!

It was hard to think of anything at once suitable, and that commended itself to his own taste, for this priest was fastidious; and even the Imprimatur of the Pope and all the Cardinals in solemn conclave, would have failed to make him like a book which

had not first commended itself to his own judgment. Still he was willing to acknowledge that certain books might be wholesome to one mind, which to another were mere nauseating compounds, neither food nor medicine.

So, making a selection of a few such works as he knew the Church approved for cases like Elfrida's, and of which he had several in store, he set them aside for her.

After all, is it not an amazing relief to have this responsibility (right some people call it) of deciding for ourselves lifted off the conscience? A large faith is required for the soul that thinks. May that not, then, be the reason why so many thinkers of the shallow sort take refuge in unbelief? That, too, like the other extreme, saves trouble and responsibility. It seems so clever too—so superior to women, and parsons, and

all that class of people who live in the habitual consciousness that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of even in the Positive Philosophy.

Having selected the books, and duly made them up into a neat brown-paper parcel, for the priest was methodical in everything he did, except in the arrangement of his books upon his writing table, and these even had a kind of method in their confusion, if not to the eye of the beholder, at least to his own mind, he sat down to think ; not as he usually thought, closely and severely, and to some point ; but as the majority of us think, wandering away into the regions of memory or anticipation, where thoughts are pictures rather than arguments.

Yes, how long it seemed since he had first seen that lovely face in the Sheldonian Theatre ! Æons of time, cycles of feeling

and experience, seemed to have been passed through since then. The whole scene seemed at once so distant and so near, as Lazarus must have looked to Dives. He laid back his head and shut his eyes. It seemed as real and as near as the little room with the Kidderminster carpet, looking out on the market gardens—so near and so real that, if his eyes had opened on the one scene instead of the other, it would hardly have surprised him. How beautiful he had thought her then—far more beautiful than he had admitted to Wynford. How well he remembered his friend's triumphant look! How strange it all was! Strangest of all that she should not have loved Wynford; if it were not even stranger that she should have been afraid of him.

Then he wondered what had become of him. He had written to him shortly after

his change of faith, but had never received an answer. Of the whole world, he had least expected that Wynford would have turned his back upon him, and his neglect had cut him to the heart. But he had been angry as well as grieved. He had been too proud to write again. Now he regretted this pride bitterly. Wynford had not been sailing upon smooth waters any more than himself. He knew his fiery, impulsive nature, and how little he had been accustomed to rough seas and contrary winds. It seemed to Godfrey as if he ought to have upheld him. Might he not even have reconciled them?

But no. A feeling which possessed his mind with the force of conviction, that he could have reconciled them, made him, strangely enough, recognize that it was better he had never attempted it.

He hardly knew whether this instinctive sense of power over the mind of Elfrida Foxley was sweetest or most terrible to him.



## CHAPTER VIII.

## A DULL JOURNEY.

**E**LFRIDA had received the parcel of books and the letter from the priest. As if it had been the Key of Paradise, she carried the little packet up to her cell, and eagerly tore open the letter.

The letter was kind and gentle, but displayed no eagerness to make a convert ; on the contrary, it bade her be sure she had just grounds for any change of faith. It bade her give time, and thought, and prayer to the weighty matter. All in vain, as may be supposed. No decision, with

Elfrida, was the result of time and thought. What she wanted was ease, and not toil ; certainty, and not faith. Oh ! why would the priest not receive her at once, and give her absolution ? And then it would be with her, as it had been with the poor woman, "all right." She next looked at the books, but without any expectation of either understanding or liking them. Elfrida was not fond of books, or, in a general way, of ideas at all.

Yet, strange to say, she found she liked these books. They were not, as I have said, argumentative. Inferentially, and by example, they showed the infinite, even supererogatory benefits resulting from frequent masses ; the happiness bestowed by being in the actual corporeal presence of God ; and the entire and perfect peace resulting in frequent confession from the power to bind and loose.

All this worked up in the life of a modern saint, Elfrida did, or thought she did, understand. It was just what she wanted. Romanism appealed in her to a natural indolence, releasing her from the trouble of looking after her own soul. And then to be in the actual bodily presence of God! There must be comfort in that!

It was the systematic, logical side of Romanism which had won Frederick Godfrey. He had never loved it. It was its lower, more sensual aspect—that aspect which at times repelled him with an unpleasant sense of charlatanism—which allured her.

Yes, she would return home, as he had recommended her, and then in a week she would write to him and say she was quite decided. It had been already arranged, as the reader knows, that she was to go home. She ear-

nestly desired now to leave Nunfield, as earnestly as she had formerly desired to remain. She looked down upon the Anglican sisterhood from a newly-attained spiritual height. The Anglican church was not the true church; that was why she had never obtained peace in it. A very comforting reflection to poor Elfrida!

This very afternoon's post brought her a letter from her mother, telling her the state of her father's affairs, that the place was sold, and that they wanted her home, "if her religious duties did not prohibit her sharing in the trials of her parents."

Mrs. Foxley did not yet know her daughter was to leave Nunfield. Now she need not know it, at least, not that her quitting it was not voluntary. Elfrida was not without her share of pride.

It was wonderful how little distressed she

was by the intelligence contained in her mother's letter. It was not as if she had been at home, and had seen all the sorrow. It almost seemed like an interposition of Providence, perhaps of the Blessed Virgin, to whom she had that day offered up her first prayer, to relieve her from the life she had dreaded.

It was a relief to Miss Blagrove to find she was to get rid of Elfrida without further tears and fuss, though she only despised her the more for the light-mindedness she supposed to be at the root of the change. The adieux on both sides were constrained and cold.

"Farewell, Elfrida," the Lady Superior said, in rather a stately manner; "I am glad you are satisfied that your vocation is not with us."

She hardly liked that her disapprobation should be so lightly felt; and in her voice

was a certain sharpness which Elfrida was too sensitive not to feel. The trodden worm, they say, will turn. Elfrida, timid as she was, flushed up with hitherto repressed anger.

“Love and peace are not here, at any rate, for me,” she said. She had a curious feeling of being superior even to the reverend mother herself, now that she had found the true faith—quite a pleasant feeling, for she had hitherto felt so immeasurably beneath her. Miss Blagrove turned round, and looked at her with amazement as great as if it had been the literal phenomenon of the proverb she had witnessed.

“Elfrida, the spirit of insubordination in which you speak shocks me. Go, seek a penance from your Director, for your soul’s sake. As for me, I forgive you.” And, with an air of long-suffering magnanimity,

which was not without a certain resemblance to offended pride, the Lady Superior disappeared. She was more ruffled than she cared to be. But a few minutes' reflection convinced her that the baby spite of such a girl as Elfrida was not worth minding. She had too much to do, and to think about, to give herself any further concern about the matter, though she felt it was "very sad."

The exhilaration of spirits Elfrida had experienced in being able partly to express the sense of Miss Blagrove's unkindness under which she had long smarted, was succeeded during the solitary journey by a re-action, and the re-action took the form of a dread of Mr. Summerwood. What would he say when he knew all? She would put off seeing him as long as she possibly could; but the evil day must come! Oh, if she had only Father Godfrey by her, to protect her

with his infallible wisdom and his heavenly tenderness !

With such feelings her consternation may be imagined, on her putting her head out of the window as the train pulled up at the little station, to see the Rector himself on the platform. The blood rushed to her face with the sudden shock ; and when he came to the door to hand her out, she hardly knew, in her panic, what she was doing. Had he come to reproach her at once with her failure at the Home ?

“ Dear Miss Foxley ! ” and the Rector took her hand tenderly. “ The Court horse is busy to-day, and so, at your mother’s request, we have driven over for you. Let me see to your luggage. I am sure you are tired.”

Never had she seen him so gentle before. He was not angry then about Nunfield. He



would be very angry when he knew all. Mr. Summerwood usually drove himself, but to-day he gave the reins to the servant. Miss Summerwood also took her place in the front of the carriage, and he got in behind with Elfrida.

It was a dull October afternoon, threatening rain. To the soft rural landscape through which the drive lay, sunshine and Summer skies were what youth and smiles are to certain human faces—under those influences, loveliest of the lovely; but not possessing the self-subsisting beauty of noble form and striking outline, and apt without these to look common-place and uninteresting.

The hills were now hidden by a low, sullen horizon of loaded rain-cloud, which looked as if it wanted but a touch to burst and fall. Heavy drops of moisture hung

on the ragged, limp-leaved hedges ; and the little carriage, as it splashed along, ploughed up the brown, pasty mud—each furrow forming a runlet for the puddly water which was instantaneously drained into it. There was not much wind ; yet fitful gusts, heard rather than felt, made now and then a faint wail through the thin-leaved branches, dislodging a drop, which fell like a big tear ; or occasionally, as they turned a corner, a sound came on the ear like the low sob which the heart cannot longer hold.

Elfrida felt it very sad somehow. She had that trait of a finer temperament which consists in being sensitive to the moods of external nature. United with insight and power, this susceptibility forms no unimportant ingredient in the genius which we call poetic ; but with Elfrida it was apt to

take the form of fear or irritation, according to her own or nature's mood. The sadness she felt now irritated her. Now that he was deposed from his spiritual throne, she even ventured to feel irritated with Mr. Summerwood that he continued to look so grave and solemn, instead of trying to cheer her. She forgot the sensation of relief she had experienced when she found he was not going to be harsh with her.

They had driven some distance, when at last he said,

"This is a sad coming home for you, dear Miss Foxley."

Then Elfrida suddenly remembered the circumstances of her return—circumstances which her own anxieties had for the time made her forget, and which even had their comforting side for her—and understood that it was the right thing for Mr. Summer-

wood to be grave—nay, she even exerted herself to transfer her own sadness, if possible, to the same account. She had answered dejectedly,

“Yes, it is very sad.”

“And I fear,” he continued, “it will prove much sadder even than you expect.”

There was something significant in his tone which startled her. She looked eagerly in his face. Mr. Summerwood was not at a loss. It would have been unbecoming himself and his position. He was master of the right set speech and the right formal solemnity for such occasions.

“Dearest Miss Foxley,” he said, and as he took her hand, some sensation of his own at that moment gave the due tremor to his voice, “it has pleased God to send you a great affliction. He has seen fit to

remove your dear father from this world of care and sorrow."

He stopped, struck by the change in Elfrida's face. She had somehow never thought of her father dying, and death was so very terrible to her! She cowered before it. As Mr. Summerwood looked in her white face, and felt the nervous trembling of her frame, he held her hand the closer—even passed his arm gently round her waist. He said :

"He departed in the faith. I administered the Holy Communion to him. God mercifully spared him to receive the rites necessary to salvation."

But Elfrida hardly listened. Mr. Summerwood was an oracle no longer. Her father! her father! And a sense of all his fondness and indulgence rushed upon her heart, accompanied by a feeling of utter de-

solation. Oh, if she could only have seen him once alive! It seemed very hard. God seemed always so very hard with her.

They were passing the old yew-tree on the village green before she became aware that Mr. Summerwood's arm was round her, or that the words he was occasionally giving utterance to were tender as well as consolatory. But his monitions, even his kindness, were now only an embarrassment. He saw, with a certain chagrin, that she was not thinking of him, that she had no perception that his tenderness was anything more than common compassion. But it was not unnatural at such a moment. It never once struck him that his power could be gone. He saw only that the time had come for merging the Director in the lover; and the little hint of a difficulty which suggested itself, even though it was hardly acknowledged, acted as

a stimulus. She was lovelier than ever. How becoming had been that passion of sorrow in her wonderful blue eyes! She must and should be his !

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE NEW CLERK.

"I HAVE asked young West in to dinner to-day," said Mr. Higginson, as he was leaving the breakfast-table one morning to go in to Smokeham for the day. "I will bring him in with me, and Gus is coming."

"And who is young West, papa?" asked Ethelind. "I don't seem to remember ever having heard of him before."

"Young West is the new clerk."

"The young man as saved my life hat the Puddle Valley Junction, Hethel," her mother said somewhat reproachfully,



“That hero ! I had forgotten his name, if I ever heard it. What kind of clerk has he turned out ?”

“Very fair—very fair indeed. He does not write just the sort of hand, but he is improving, and he takes great pains to understand everything—about the working of the pits and the management of the men—a clever, noticing chap—thinks nothing beneath him, as some whipper-snappers do. I began with him as a clerk in the bag-factory, and he is there still ; but if I find he is trustworthy, I may advance him.”

Good-natured Mrs. Higginson listened with benevolent interest, and even a slight feeling of triumph, to this account of the well-doing of her protégé and preserver. She had always felt a little nettled by her daughter's indifference towards him. Even Helen never seemed to take quite the interest she

ought to have done in a person who had saved Mrs. Higginson's life ; and when directly appealed to for admiration, had always said she thought anybody would have done the same thing. She went off now with her two pupils to their school-room, as if she had not been listening to the conversation.

Company, as we know, was generally a great trial to Mrs. Higginson—an anxious dignity incumbent on the “high position” she had attained. No doubt she did enjoy it in a certain sense ; but the enjoyment was not pleasure. She had had pleasure, when she was young, in dancing with the Odd Fellows and the Foresters, on club-days, on the cricket-ground of her native country town—a festivity to which admission could be procured for the sum of sixpence ; and she would have had pleasure now in having all the old friends of those merry days to

tea, and to an exhibition of all her grandeur, had such an entertainment been a social possibility, which, of course, it was not. And now she had once more a sensation of pleasure at the prospect of entertaining the new clerk.

"It would be such a treat to him," thought the benevolent woman; and she felt no drawback of *mauvaise honte* at the idea of entertaining a clerk. He would not know the ways of high life any more than herself. The pleasure she felt in the anticipation was only slightly qualified by a fear lest the girls, meaning Ethelind and Helen, would be haughty to him.

In her ignorance Mrs. Higginson might have fancied that a clerk and a governess were on a somewhat similar social footing; but evidently Helen did not think so, and when she had asked the latter if she would

not join the party in the dining-room to-day, she had declined; and Mrs. Higginson had almost fancied she had not been quite pleased at being asked.

“ But you’ll be in the drawing-room hafter dinner, my dear, won’t you ?” she asked, in rather an entreating tone ; for though Helen always made her appearance when they were alone, or when only Augustus was there, she now frequently absented herself when there was company. This was putting the matter in a new light.

“ If it is to be any satisfaction to you, dear Mrs. Higginson, of course I shall come—to dinner, too, if you like,” said Helen the proud.

“ Well, then, my dear, and it will. Mr. ’Igginson, of course ’ll take you hin, as there ain’t any other lady. Hand, my dear, hi’ll take it kind has you won’t snub the young

man, but just talk to him a bit, for hi can't 'elp feeling as 'ow hi'm hunder a hobligation to 'im. Hit won't 'urt you to be a bit civil."

Helen laughed. "I will, I will be very civil," she said ; and being candid as well as proud, she felt a little ashamed of herself. All she knew of this young man was in his favour. Why was it, then, that her imagination always represented him as vulgar and presuming, and looking as if he ought to have a pen behind his ear? Then, which would be very disagreeable, might he not imagine that, because she was a governess, she was more on a level with himself than the rest of the party? He, being only a clerk in a paper-bag manufactory, or in a wholesale coal dépôt, she was not sure which, if he had not been something much lower and more objectionable, could not be

supposed to be possessed of that insight which would have shown him at once that Helen was a lady. In truth, very few even of the persons of good birth and breeding whom she had met at the Higginsons's had discovered it—a fact which was at once puzzling and mortifying. Could it be, after all, that even people of birth and breeding required that the “gold” should have the “guinea stamp,” to enable them to recognize it? Was vulgarity of mind really common to all conditions of life? These suggestions were, however, merely passing thoughts. The chief matter in hand at present was to keep her promise of being civil to the clerk, without compromising her own dignity.

Helen's vocation was to be a martyr, and she descended to the drawing-room before dinner in the heroic frame of mind becoming that “mission.”

The gentlemen had already arrived, having all walked out together from Smokeham, in the golden dusk of a calm October evening. It was now nearly dark, but the windows were never closed or the curtains drawn till the family had gone in to dinner. A soft, yellow glow in the west yet marked the outline of the Bloomshire hills, and gave a dioramic effect to the forms of the trees, between which glimmered the statues and urns on the lawn, visible by their own whiteness. Inside, the room was lighted by that blazing fire which Mrs. Higginson, like all of the genuine John Bull race, so dearly loved. Helen had not come down till the gong sounded, and the party were already being marshalled for the dining-room when she entered.

Immediately opposite the door, and with the light full on their faces, stood Mrs. Hig-

ginson and her "preserver." Helen glanced at him with a pang of curiosity, remembering the task she had undertaken.

His appearance, at least as far as she could see by the shadowy flicker of the fire-light, was a pleasant surprise. A slight figure, looking even slighter alongside the ample magnitude and voluminous silk of Mrs. Higginson, and not short, even compared with the lofty build of the paper-bag manufacturer and his clerical son! A young, almost boyish face, of the Saxon type, too fair-complexioned, one might have thought, for a man, had it not been perfectly free from effeminacy either of feature or expression. Though young, the gravity of manhood, perhaps of grief or anxiety, might be legibly enough read, on his lineless forehead, and his firm yet full lips seemed to bespeak almost equally a power of passion and of pur-



pose. A latent capacity for joy seemed to lurk behind that gravity, and to look out from the open blue eyes. No, it was not a vulgar face, at least it did not look vulgar in the firelight.

"Come along, then," said Mr. Higginson, as Helen entered, ostentatiously holding out his big arm, conveniently hooked for her to place her hand in.

It was a luxurious dinner, artistically cooked and magnificently served, as it always was at the Higginsons's. Mrs. Higginson, in a happy state of naturalness, and without any *arrière pensée* as to her ignorance of social manners, gave free scope to the kindness of her heart by pressing the clerk to eat and drink each and all of the dainties so lavishly provided. As Helen watched him from the further corner of the table (for she was interested, or at least

curious about him) she could see he did ample justice to the good cheer, but quite as if he took it as a matter of course, and had been used to such fare all his life. Not one whit did he seem dazzled by the splendour of Belvidere Mansion—a circumstance which raised him not a little in the opinion of Helen Godfrey, while it caused a degree of disappointment to Mrs. Higginson.

“’And the menoo, Hethel, to Mr. West. Hi’m very fond hof this dish—chicken wings it is really, with mushrooms, if you don’t hunderstand the name has is set down. The deal o’ trouble has it takes me to make ’em hout! But hin ’igh life, you see, plain common Henglish for dishes would sound vulgar.”


Mr. West gave the proverbial consent of silence to this proposition; or perhaps he did not know the manners of high life, and

deferred to Mrs. Higginson's superior knowledge. As he looked up to receive the little sheet of ornamental paper on which the menu was inscribed, the latent fun of his nature seemed suddenly, in a sort of jet, to rise from the slumbering springs, and sparkle for a moment through his eyes, though the rest of his countenance was as perfectly grave as the most rigid politeness could possibly have exacted.

Helen glanced at Ethelind, well knowing how her mother's speech would have annoyed her in a usual way, though she invariably carried off such annoyance in so successful a manner that only those could discover it who were acquainted with the symptoms. But none such did she betray on the present occasion. What needed Ethel Higginson to mind what her father's servant (for what was a clerk but a

servant?) thought? It was just possible, too, he might think her mother a very fine lady, like old Mrs. Bond, the ironmonger's widow, an acquaintance of humbler times, whom Mrs. Higginson noticed in a patronising way. It struck Helen that Ethel herself had never looked handsomer than she did to-night. Perhaps it was the altogether superior position she felt herself to occupy, but she had more than ever the air of a Crown Princess, and it was the sort of air that suited the style of her beauty. She was dressed too in black, which was at all times more becoming to her than colour. The richest of black silk, fashionably but plainly made, with a sweeping train added to the dignity of her figure. The "What oh" body, as her mother called it, with simple trimming of antique lace, the crimson geraniums in her

dark hair, were just what harmonised with her slender shape and the queenly set of her head. Helen admired her greatly, and she wondered if Mr. West had been struck with her. Certainly it did not seem as if he had. He hardly appeared to have noticed her, and of Helen's presence, even when she had first come into the drawing-room, he had seemed altogether unconscious. "But, of course," thought Helen, "it would be presuming in Mr. Higginson's clerk to make any advances to the young ladies of the house; and probably Miss Higginson's style of beauty requires more taste and culture to appreciate than he possesses." But, notwithstanding this prejudgment with regard to Mr. West's taste and culture, the promise she had made Mrs. Higginson to be agreeable to him did not appear in quite the same unpleasant light it had done at the time.



The three gentlemen were rather longer than usual in following the ladies to the drawing-room.

That handsome apartment was now in a blaze of light. A splendid cut-glass gaselien, which hung from the centre of the ceiling, filled every corner with its radiance, so that even the dark curtains, heavy with magnificence, seemed to give out reflections of ruby light. As Helen sat with her fancy needlework in her hand (she was not very fond of fancy-needlework), dreaming rather than working, the ghauts and the temples, and the palm-trees on the walls assumed, as they had often done before to her fancy, a most grotesque and unpleasant kind of perspective, as if there were no walls at all; and the truly English scene represented by the drawing-room of Belvidere Mansion appeared, in some theatrically unpleasant,

Harlequin sort of manner, indefinitely to extend itself into Asiatic and incongruous environments. She had a confused, worrying feeling as if she had been set down shelterless, by the agency of some uncomfortable genius out of the Arabian Nights, or some "medium" out of a London drawing-room, in the midst of the plains of Bengal. The dark-skinned, white-robed figures, with turbans on their heads, and pitchers, something like Roman amphoræ, in their hands, looked as if they might not improbably step down from their places by the river upon the pile carpet, or even tumble into one of the pits, with the thorny rose-wreaths encircling the brinks.

Now, Helen, as she lounged on her comfortable gilt settee, covered with crimson damask, was by no means criticizing all this; she was only feeling it with a semi-con-

sciousness of the effect, when she became aware that Mrs. Higginson was doing the honours of the room to her guest.

“The statooets—the little halabaster figures, Hi mean, Haugustus brought from Rome, and these Chenay baskets, and growps with flowers and things, are real Dresden. Perhaps you wouldn’t believe, for they look but simple things, what a deal I gave for them ; but H’im fond of Chenay ; and Mr. ’Igginson halways leaves these things to me, has, though Hi say hit has shouldn’t say hit, he likes my taste. I got a harchitect to go over to Paris and take the pattern of the gazebo at the Hexibition. Well-a-day ! it makes my ’eart hache now to think of them poor Paris folks, hand hall they ’ave gone through since then ; but they say as ’ow pride comes before a fall. But has I was a-saying, the gazebo was quite my taste, and



if you 'aven't seen it by daylight, you must come hagain."

"Thank you, you are most kind," said the young clerk, in a manner which raised him yet another step in Helen's good graces, for it betrayed no consciousness of Mrs. Higginson's weak points, though she felt an instinctive conviction that they had not escaped his notice. Helen now liked Mrs. Higginson so much, that it pained her when any one laughed at her.

At this moment her fair, fat, kind face looked radiant with happiness.

"Hand the paper. Have you noticed that, Mr. West?—that was my taste, too. Hi was halways fond of scenery."

To this Mr. West did not immediately reply. He seemed occupied in gazing into one of the abysses in the carpet, and the dead pause which ensued caused Ethel, who

had seated herself apart with the "Saturday Review" as her companion, to lift her eyes from her paper with a look of haughty inquiry, while the Higginson gentlemen, who had been talking the political news of the day to one another, suddenly paused, and the social converse of the whole party came suddenly to a stand-still.

But Mrs. Higginson, when sure of her ground, as she was at this present moment, was a woman of resources, and it all at once suggested itself to her mind that Mr. West, being a young man, might like better perhaps to talk to a young woman than to an old one. To think a good-natured thing with Mrs. Higginson, always with the proviso above mentioned, was to do it; so, with the whole party for her audience, she said,

"By-the-by, Mr. West, I don't think as I

'ave hintroduced you yet to hour"—governess, she was going to say, but she changed to—"hour young friend—Mr. West—Miss Godfrey."

Mr. West had risen, as in duty bound, and they were looking one another full in the face, just as Mrs. Higginson pronounced Helen's name. Helen could not avoid noticing that the young man flushed suddenly up, and for an instant—like a flash, it was so quick—looked searchingly into her face. She felt herself colour slightly. What could it mean? She could not be mistaken. Did he admire her very much? for Helen was aware that many people at Marshborough had admired her; or was it that he, a tradesman's clerk, felt awkward in being introduced to a young lady?

But if this were the reason, he seemed to conquer his awkwardness in a marvellously

quick and complete manner. Crossing over to where Helen was seated, with as much ease as if his whole existence had been passed in court circles, he began to enter into conversation with her. He only spoke upon the common topics of the day, but he handled them in a pleasant, almost in an original manner. Helen had never been so well entertained in Smokeham before, and, forgetting he was only a paper-bag maker's subordinate, she became almost merry. In his conversation, however, there was none of that flavour of flirtation, that flattering, subtle sense, expressed or implied, of personal admiration, which mostly qualifies a conversation between two more than usually engaging young persons of opposite sexes. They might have been two married persons, or he might have been a friendly old gentleman. "Of course," said Helen to

herself, still in a commendatory vein, "he would not presume to flirt with a young lady in his master's house."

After a prolonged conversation, she became again aware that he was looking at her narrowly, as if scrutinizing her features, and once when she turned round she again caught his eye. Once more he coloured, but much more slightly than the first time, saying, with no more embarrassment than the acknowledgment was likely to cause an ingenuous young man,

"I beg your pardon, Miss Godfrey. I was looking at you because your features and your name both remind me of—of a person with whom—whom I used to meet some time ago, and I was trying to trace the resemblance in detail. In many respects, it is very striking."

"I don't think it likely, Mr. West, that

you can ever have met any of my family. It is not a very large one, and we have not been wanderers. I come from Marshborough. My father was the late Dean."

"Indeed," said the young clerk, as if the information possessed some interest for him, but at the moment he said no more. Helen fancied when he addressed her again that there was a nameless difference in his manner. She liked him better, perhaps, than she wished to like him; but she was not sorry to have had an opportunity of telling him who she was.

"I am afraid you find Smokeham a very ugly place after Marshborough," he said. "Are you paying a long visit here?"

"I am not paying a visit at all. I live here. I am governess to Mr. Higginson's younger daughters."

If he had not looked surprised before, he certainly did now.

"I am very fortunate," she continued warmly, "in having found such a situation ; and I hope by the time the dear children no longer require a governess, I shall no longer require a situation."

"I hope not," said Mr. West ; and there seemed hardly anything more to be said on the occasion. But there was something like a question in his tone, if not in his words, and Helen seemed to be aware of this.

"My two brothers will have left school by that time. Will—that is, the elder one got a scholarship at Winchester last year, so we can manage easily for George now. Will is a clever boy."

Helen was apt to get eager and forget herself when she indulged in the rare treat of speaking of the boys. In their own schoolboy fashion they had such a strong love for her that her heart swelled as she

thought of them through the idealism of distance, which subdued almost into graces those harsher accompaniments of noise, fidgets, and general obtrusiveness which are apt at all times to mar the actual presence of the species.

“And does your residence at Smokeham depend upon the time Will and George remain at school?”

“Yes, we could not have afforded to send them unless—that is to such a school as they ought to go to,” she added somewhat proudly.

“And you are doing all this for their sake?”

“It is not much to do, Mr. West. If it were not for being away from home, it would be nothing at all. I am very fond of Mrs. Higginson,” and her voice seemed to challenge anyone to say a word



against that large, ungrammatical woman.

To all this Mr. West only replied, "I wish I had a sister." His tone was rather as if he were expressing his feelings aloud than as if he were addressing Helen.

"And have you no sister?"

"I have no one at all, Miss Godfrey."

"That is sad for you." And Helen felt sorry for the poor young man; but he made no further rejoinder.

Augustus Higginson had in the meantime been watching with surprise the apparently earnest conversation going on between Miss Godfrey and the clerk, with an odd, indefinable feeling that he was being deprived of something which naturally belonged to himself. He now took advantage of the pause to draw a chair near Helen, with a certain air of privilege, much more pronounced than usual. Helen received him pleasantly. She

had always liked him, and often felt grateful to him on company occasions, for saving her from that feeling of being, and of appearing, neglected, so bitter to a young, proud spirit ; though, perhaps, hardly the right dignified sort of sensation for a martyr. But though she had received him with perhaps more than her usual graciousness, and he had displayed more than his usual gallantry, Helen felt as if there was an incomprehensible flatness about their intercourse to-night. Every now and then her ears as well as her eyes wandered in the direction of the large circular ottoman with the pile of pillows in the centre, where, shoulder to shoulder, though Ethel occasionally leant forward with an air of unusual animation, the daughter of the house was engaged in a lively and, it would seem, even earnest conversation with her father's clerk. But then it was a very rare

thing to see Ethel so animated, unless in one of those bursts of confidence with which she occasionally favoured Helen, or when excited by some company which roused her ambition, and gratified her aristocratic tastes.

That this animation should have been kindled by the conversation of a clerk, was indeed a phenomenon of so rare a nature that it was perhaps no wonder that it distracted Helen's attention from the commoner occurrence of her brother's civilities.

## CHAPTER X.

## A WILD NIGHT AT WILLESMEERE COURT.

**A**FTER that visit of the Higginsons, Colonel Foxley had never held up his head again. It had seemed completely to realise to him the fall of his race, and the departure of those "good old times," round which his heartstrings were twisted. He was not aware that these "times," and the life that was in them, had passed away long ago, and that those delicate fleshly tendrils were clinging to a corpse. Poor Colonel Foxley had spent his existence in vain de-

sires to re-animate the dead, instead of endeavouring to inspire the living with the old goodness and the old beauty which he so revered and lamented ; but which, let us eagerly hope, belong exclusively neither to the past nor the present. The past is father to the present, and he is an unwise as well as an unworthy son who reviles his parent. We are what our fathers have made us, though they had their faults, which we must avoid if we can.

The day before that on which Elfrida was to return, he came into the little morning-room where his wife was at work. She looked up, as he entered, anxiously. He had been looking ill for some days. Now there was something cadaverous in his face.

"Rose, dear," he said, with unusual gentleness, though he was never ungentle, "there is something queer about my left leg,

as if I did not feel it, and could not quite move it."

She rose hastily, but not fussily, this poor worried woman—the last prop of a tottering edifice—who was not yet worn out, but still had within her a fund of endurance.

"Let us send for the doctor, Geoffrey, dearest," she said, taking his hand. Her voice was calm, but he could read her feelings in her eyes.

"Send for him, my dear, for it will comfort you. You deserve all the poor comfort I can give you."

As Mrs. Foxley feared, and the Colonel knew, the attack was paralysis, and of that most fatal kind which creeps on gradually. The doctor ordered him to bed, and prescribed all the approved remedies. But, as he had said himself from the first moment, it was all in vain. He lay in the very bed,

and in the very room he had occupied all his life. He looked round wistfully now at those familiar objects in that most unfamiliar hour. And then his eyes fell on the face of his wife.

“Rose, dear, you have been a good wife to me. I know how much you have borne. God reward you! Be gentle to the poor girl. He has not turned out a good young man. Poor Wynford has his troubles too.”

The only answer she made was to kiss him, for her heart was very full. She thought then she would never speak another hasty word to Elfrida, however foolish or provoking she might be. As for the troubles of Mr. Wynford, she had too many of her own to think of them then; but the young man had been dear to her, and at this moment the allusion to him gave her a momentary thrill of pain, almost like remorse.

"Have you sent for her?" the Colonel asked.

"I have not, dear. There would be no train stopping here to-night after the telegram reached her, and she is to be here by the first to-morrow, at any rate."

"To-morrow!" said the Colonel, meditatively, and his eyes wandered about slowly and lingeringly. "The old place!—the old things! When I was young, Rose, I thought I should lead such a fine brave life, and restore the old name and the old ways. But God is very good. Is Deane come?"

Now Deane had been the name of the late Rector. It was the first symptom he had shown of a confused memory.

"Mr. Summerwood, dear, is in the morning room, waiting till you send for him. He has been very kind," she added, with a slight twinge of self-reproach, for



her heart was softened then to all men.

"Summerwood! Ah! he took away the old church—or—have I been dreaming only it was away? Yes, bring him up, Rose; and you, and—did you say Elfrida was not at home? I forget, dear, I forget strangely." Again he looked round the room, at every well-known object it contained, as if seeking to assure himself of their presence—perhaps, by their means, of his own identity.

But Mr. Summerwood had now arrived, and with all due solemnity, probably not without some real feeling, he administered his last communion to the old soldier, who, though he had fought on the losing side in the battle of life, had been true and gallant in defeat; more than can be said, perhaps, for all who fight in the ranks of the victors. For do not all who have something to gain, and are quite unscrupulous as

to how they gain it, naturally range themselves on the side of the conquering party?

The Colonel's mind seemed to wander more and more after Mr. Summerwood left, and before night he fell into that long mysterious stupor—the antechamber of death—into which the heart of the living so fruitlessly longs to penetrate.

“Oh!” thought Mrs. Foxley, “does he hear me?—does he see me?—or what does he see and hear?”

All that long October night she sat and listened to the wash of the rain on the window-panes, and the roar of the wind in the chimney-top. It seemed, in its inarticulate passion, to agonise to deliver some message from the world beyond our senses, then to wander in disappointment away among the aspens, and over the meadows, with an eerie despairing moan. Sometimes she sat as if

in a semi-conscious, benumbed state of feeling; sometimes pictures of her past life crowded one upon another, like a series of dissolving views in the background of the picture before the eyes of her flesh. The motionless figure on the bed, the old-fashioned room, dimly revealed by the smoky flame from the cauliflower-topped candle in a basin, were not more real than that long green archery-ground among the flowering almonds and acacias, with the great round target at the end, where she had first seen Colonel Foxley, looking so handsome and so gallant; or more vivid than that other scene, when they had stood together in the old village church—the frosty September sunshine falling in broad lines on the tall pews and grim hatchments. She seemed yet to feel how she had reigned queen of the occasion. Could it

really be so long ago? How old she was! And yet she did not feel as she used to suppose old people must feel. Life beat full in her veins, and her heart was as warm as in the days of her youth—only sadder and less hopeful. The familiar, monotonous life she had led since the wedding morning she remembered so well—so monotonous it had felt as if it must last for ever—could it really be ended? In that retrospective glance, she seemed almost to hear the rush of the years as they whizzed past, like the souls of the dead mariners in Coleridge's wonderful poem. Could that weary, almost aged figure on the bed be her gallant Geoffrey? And a sudden sense of his high integrity and his unfeigned kindness rushed over her heart like a flood, pressing upon it with a weight of anguish which, at the moment, seemed greater than she should ever be able to bear. Sud-

denly she rose and went to the window.

It was what sailors call a "roving" night. The shower was over, but great drops trickled down the window-panes, and the wind drove breathlessly onwards the rack of the clouds, in wild and changeful masses. A stormy moon tinged for a moment the water of the moat with a ghostly glimmer, and leaves and branches were whirled madly about, in the frantic war-dance of the blast. The movement, the turmoil, were in tune with Mrs. Foxley's feelings. She stood with the blind in her hand, fascinated; then, with a start, she turned round again to the dim, motionless chamber.

It was so still there, and the hours were so long and silent. Yet she did not wish them shorter. She shivered as she thought of the daylight, and of how the room might look then.

Mrs. Foxley threw herself on her knees, and prayed fervently for the passing spirit, which was strangely though unconsciously associated in her mind with the wind in its passionate, speechless strivings. Oh, how tender she would be to Elfrida !

The dawn broke at last over the leaf-strewn paths and the rain-steeped meadows, and the wind once more was silent ; and so was that struggling, labouring breath.

When the doctor had taken leave about midnight he had said, with a grave face,

“There will likely be a change before the morning.”

Doctors must be accustomed to make such speeches, as clergymen are accustomed to read the Burial Service ; notwithstanding, one wonders if any deadening effect of habit can entirely banish the thought that, some day or other, the same speech will be made

for him by some other doctor, some other clergyman will read the same words over his coffin, and the old stale truism will have become the most importunate and emphatic of truths.

All that dreary morning, outwardly even so oppressive in the blankness of its cloudy sky, and sullenness of its sodden earth, Mrs. Foxley, in the first prostration of her grief, yearned for the return of Elfrida with the impatience of a sufferer awaiting the only chance of relief. At last she came, and the first moments were moments of satisfaction, such as it was.

Mother and daughter wept and sobbed in each other's arms, and were for the time more united in spirit than they had ever been before. The larger, more hopeful heart of the mother even went out into the contemplation of sundry consolatory possibilities.

Poor Mrs. Foxley! it was the eye to see such possibilities that had upheld her all along.



## CHAPTER XI.

## MAN PROPOSES.

THE dreary, repressed bustle which succeeds a death pervaded the old house at Willesmere Court. On Mrs. Foxley devolved all the arrangements for the funeral, and for suitable mourning; and beyond these immediate needs lay yet more anxious and distracting cares. Poor Mrs. Foxley would have liked, as well as any other widow who has lost a loved and loving husband, to sit down and, as it were, luxuriate in her desolation, leaving milliners and undertakers to provide the due yards of crape,

and the proper number of hat-bands and scarves dictated on the occasion by the laws of polite society.

But it was necessary to unite economy with respect for the dead, and Mrs. Foxley had an instinctive feeling, like the intuition of genius, that no one could accomplish this end so deftly as herself. And so she ordered and arranged everything, and saw everybody in person, and sat hour after hour of the dull October day, or by the dusky light of the tallow candles in the evening, painfully stitching at crape and paramatta, till her eyes were red with straining. The luxury of tears she kept for her widowed pillow. They would have hindered her work. All the first day she sat wondering if Elfrida would help her ; on the second she mildly hinted a suggestion that she might run up the breadths of her

own dress, so that it might be ready for Sunday. Elfrida burst into tears.

“Oh! mamma, I could not sew, and poor papa lying there!” And she rushed out of the room.

Her mother worked on, wounded and angry, till the big bursting tears dimmed her eyes, and she laid aside her work for a instant to wipe them away. Her daughter's answer had sounded like a reproach.

In the meantime, Elfrida had taken refuge in the somewhat cold sanctuary of her own little room. It was an old-fashioned, simple enough little apartment, yet it looked almost luxurious in comparison with her cell at Nunfield. From the window, too, she could see the green meadows and the shining, metallic surface of the moat; and she could hear the thin-leaved, querulous  
ver of the aspens, and the pathetic coo

of the wood-pigeons; and, though she hardly noted these things, they influenced and enervated her with a more plaintive sadness.

She now began to repeat some prayers, Hail Marys and Our Fathers, with a feeling between faith in their efficacy and a sense of superiority to her mother, and Mr. Summerwood, and Miss Blagrove, and all who were yet wandering amidst the uncertainties of Protestantism. She regarded her new-found religion in the light of a sort of talisman—a state of feeling which, I am afraid, is by no means peculiar to Roman Catholics; though, on the whole, it seems less unreasonable in them than in persons belonging to what it is the fashion to call “other denominations”—a term which it would not be difficult to imagine contained a covert satire.

Having finished her pious exercises,

Elfrida began to think of Mary and Martha, and of how her mother was exactly like Martha. If she carried her reflections and comparisons further than this, she did not quite acknowledge it to herself. But how could her mother sit and occupy her mind about shapes of hems and fashions of crape trimming, when she ought to have been engrossed with her own misery and the state of her father's soul? Elfrida did not know that it was a maxim of the monks of the old times that "Laborare est orare," or she might have had more respect for her mother's industry. From this point of view perhaps Mrs. Foxley's had been a more prayerful life than her daughter's.

But how was she ever to confess the more decided religious step she had taken? Her timid mind quailed at the prospect of  
disapprobation, perhaps contempt,

she should encounter. Oh, how could anybody be expected to think of skirt patterns, and the most economical way of trimming a bonnet creditably, when her own eternal happiness hung in the balance?

By the time the Colonel was laid, the last of his race, in the family vault, Mrs. Foxley had once more abandoned all hope of finding a friend and helper in her daughter. For her father's sake she would be very tender to her; but the burden of life, as it had always done, must rest on herself alone. And now the tender approbation, at times the fond admiration, which had cheered her on, in

“The days that are no more,”

would be wanting. Those days, dull as they had often seemed, looked now like the golden age of her life. The thought of her own and her daughter's future weighed

heavily on Mrs. Foxley. Their means were of the very slenderest—little short, indeed, of absolute penury. Where even to live she did not know. She thought she must try to get a very little house somewhere; that she might perhaps be able to dispose of a little fancy-work, for which she had a talent. That Elfrida would earn anything was hardly to be hoped.

But relief came from an unexpected quarter. She had, of course, written to tell the Higginsons of the Colonel's death, and she had had a kind, though perhaps rather patronizing letter, from Mrs. Higginson in return.

Mrs. Higginson "knew what she must feel from what her own feelings would be if anything was to happen to Mr. H. To be sure she would be well left; and at Mrs. Foxley's and her age it was a sad thing to be deprived of the comforts as they had

been used to." Then she went on to make a proposal. "Mr. Higginson had a nice little house in a quiet street in Smokeham—in fact, they had lived there themselves once—and he had given it some time ago to Mrs. Higginson. It had pleased Providence to save her life at the Puddle Valley Junction, coming home from Willesmere, and she had long thought as how she should make some thank-offering; and if Mrs. Foxley would occupy her house for the paying the taxes and the like, it would just answer the purpose, and she was heartily welcome; and not to think it was putting her to any inconvenience. The rent of such a place was nothing to her. Mr. H. was very liberal, as he could well afford to be. And she could send her fruit and vegetables from Belvidere Mansion—they had quantities, as they kept a gardener that took his hundred



and fifty pounds a year, with five men under him. And as to the fern-work on satin, if it was so pretty, of course the drawing-room at Willesmere, when that dark, worm-eaten old wood was all taken away, would want refurnishing. She would give her an order for the whole thing; and there was plenty of rich folks in Smokeham as she would speak to for her. Mrs. Foxley could not do better than come to Smokeham."

And poor Mrs. Foxley felt herself that probably she could not do better, with this prospect of a roof over her head, and a friend who, if somewhat ostentatious, seemed thoroughly earnest in her kindness. Yet, as she re-read her letter, the thought that "Geoffrey" could never see it, came almost with a sense of relief. Before she wrote, accepting Mrs. Higginson's offer, she communicated the plan to Elfrida. The terms of

the letter seemed to make no impression whatever on her daughter, who appeared wholly engrossed with the proposal on its own merits, and was more delighted at the prospect than her mother had ventured to hope.

“You are pleased on account of Nunfield, I suppose?”

“Oh! no, mamma. I don’t like Nunfield now. I found no peace there.” And a confession she had longed to make since the first paroxysm of grief on account of her father’s death had abated, hovered on her lips.

“Peace! no, indeed. I could have told you that, Elfrida. Peace is only to be obtained in honest endeavours to fulfil the duties of that position God’s wisdom has seen fit to place us in. How could you expect peace in the performance of fantastic

ceremonies, which are really no better than rank popery?"

Poor Elfrida said no more. Her timid heart shrank back into itself. Oh, for Father Godfrey to strengthen her! Once at Smokeham, she could do all things upheld by him. He stood to her as the representative of the Holy Catholic Church. And thus the wedge which had long severed the sympathies of the practical, self-sacrificing mother, and the more devout and self-occupied daughter, was driven down deeper and firmer.

During the short period that intervened between the funeral of Colonel Foxley and the departure of the widow and her daughter, Mr. Summerwood was most assiduous and thoughtful in his attentions to Mrs. Foxley. In spite of herself, she began at least not to dislike him: He made himself so

useful in many matters in which it would have been painful to her to act herself, and showed so much sense and practical ability, that she gave him her confidence in a way that at one time she would not have believed possible. This was exactly the position he wished to occupy. Had he been her brother, or her son, he could hardly have made himself more necessary to her, and in her woman's heart she felt the advantage of having a male friend to face the world on her behalf.

Before the visit of Wynford she had suggested to her husband that Mr. Summerwood's interest in Elfrida might have a deeper origin than that of a shepherd's care for his weakling lamb. Occasionally, though the Rector and Elfrida never met alone, or seemed to seek each other at all, the same idea would flit across her mind now. She

was not, therefore, surprised, when, on the day before they quitted their old home, Mr. Summerwood confided to her the secret of his attachment to her daughter, and entreated her good offices in furthering his suit.

“I am aware,” he said, “that hitherto Miss Foxley has never regarded me in any other light than that of her spiritual guide. I believe she may yet be struggling with the remains of a misplaced affection, but one who made so noble a sacrifice in the beginning is certain to triumph in the end.”

“So noble a sacrifice !” Hitherto Mrs. Foxley had never seen Elfrida’s conduct under any other aspect but that of consummate folly or provoking waywardness ; and though struck by the originality of the Rector’s view, her own was not to be changed in a moment.

"I have sometimes feared," she said, and the happy, generous face of the young man she had loved as a son came forcibly before her, "that his disappointment drove him to despair."

"Possibly!" said the Rector, haughtily; for opposition, and more especially opposition from a woman, always affronted him, and he felt now that Mrs. Foxley was in that position, spiritual and temporal, when she should have been entirely subservient to him. No worldling could estimate advantages of position more accurately, or feel a right to act upon them more strongly, than Mr. Summerwood did. "Quite possibly, Mrs. Foxley; but what guarantee could we have had for the religious or moral stability of the man whom the smallest cross in his own will drives into forgetfulness of every duty and decency?"

Mrs. Foxley felt herself reproved and silenced, if not convinced; and seeing that she was silenced, victory restored the Rector's mind to a more genial frame.

"You must remember," he said, with what he felt to be magnanimous tenderness, "that he was not the only man who loved Miss Foxley, and had to suffer disappointment."

She felt the contrast he intended to bring before her, and yet, and yet——

There is a very homely old saying which, in spite of the paradox, we all feel to be true——

"A man convinced against his will  
Is of the same opinion still."

Mrs. Foxley did not answer Mr. Summerwood, and, taking her silence as the tribute due to his superiority, he continued, as if the whole arrangement had rested with

himself, and he, not Elfrida's parents, had been responsible.

"I have sometimes regretted that I sent her to Nunfield. My dear friend, the Lady Superior, was not quite the person to entrust with our tender dove. She is a woman of immense energy, but with too little sympathy for the shrinking timidity of our gentle Elfrida."

The last words jarred on Mrs. Foxley's feelings. She almost hated the man as he uttered them. How dared he to speak as if her daughter was at his disposal? Without knowing why, but from that talisman of divination she possessed in her own heart, she felt that his was cold and narrow, and his religion dogmatic, formal, and merciless. Yet, as she reflected upon the conversation with Mr. Summerwood, she was forced to acknowledge to herself that she saw no



thing better—nothing likely to be so good for Elfrida as what he had proposed. True, she did not like him, but Elfrida did. She needed guidance, and he seemed the only person to whose guidance she would submit. It would be a respectable, safe position for her daughter, and, if Mr. Summerwood did not possess much heart or soul, he was an efficient clergyman, and punctual in the performance of every duty. No doubt, therefore, he would be punctual in the performance of his duty as a husband. Yes, it was the best thing for Elfrida, for what, indeed, would become of her should she be left alone in the world without fortune, friends, or guidance? In this last point of view, Mr. Summerwood's proposal seemed not only tolerable, but desirable.

Comfort in her daughter, Mrs. Foxley knew now, she never should have ; but

would it not be something to be delivered from that wearing anxiety about her future which haunted her like a prophecy of evil to come ?

## CHAPTER XII.

## CHRISTMAS EVE.

THE new clerk soon became a frequent visitor at Belvidere Mansion. Ethelind even, as on that first night, unbent to him ; and, when there was no more important person present, put forth those powers of fascination she only exercised when she especially wished to be pleasing. Ethel Higginson could at all times maintain her own place with dignity, and force those whom she sought to please to treat her with respect and consideration. But, in striving to please Mr. West, her father's

junior clerk, she manifested a new phase of her character. One day she said, with that curt emphasis which distinguished the enunciation of her opinions in her own family, and had little in common with that suave-gentleness with which her arguments were advanced in "good" society—

"Mr. West is a clever man, and not only a clever man, but a gentleman."

This Helen felt to be true, and she was even a little mortified to be obliged to acknowledge to herself that, though practically she had always acted on some such belief, Ethelind had been beforehand with her in the frank recognition of the fact.

Helen was sometimes, in listening to Ethel's conversation with Mr. West, quite astonished and a little mortified at her cleverness. She seemed to poor Helen to be well read on all sorts of subjects ; and so

she was, as far as these may be studied in weekly papers and the leaders of the "Times," with an occasional dip into monthlies and quarterlies. Very few women in provincial or country society are as plausibly fluent about the "Woman's Question," "the Descent of Man," and everything else about which the age so busily occupies itself—at least in talk. If Ethel had not one original idea to offer upon any subject whatever, she had at least the art to appropriate intelligently and utter fearlessly those which were the most fashionable—a much surer way of obtaining a reputation for cleverness, and the reputation was what she cared for.

Mr. West was evidently nothing loath to bear his full share in the discussions, which were altogether much lighter and livelier than one would have imagined from the occasional heavy nature of the subjects; but

in this latter half of the nineteenth century we have an easy way of treating ponderous matters, and it was Ethel Higginson's especial pride to be in no respect behind her age.

But when the young clerk was tête-à-tête with Helen, he seemed, strangely, for one who was fond of talking, to prefer listening. She was quite conscious that he led her to speak of her own family and her own affairs, till he seemed quite to have established himself as her confidant. It was very strange, when she came to think about it, but really nothing seemed to interest him so much, and he appeared to remember—almost to treasure everything she told him.

On Christmas Eve they were sitting together in a large empty room, with a gorgeous Christmas tree in the centre, helping to complete some decorations—Mrs. Higginson

having, at the last moment, pressed all hands into the service. There was no one in the room just at the time. Ethel had gone to see that her maid had understood her orders for her evening dress, Mrs. Higginson had obeyed a summons to give an opinion on the effect of the supper-table, and Augustus was detained in Smokeham by the decorations of St. Michael's Church. Mr. West had been unusually silent all day, and though he had worked, he did not seem to have thrown his usual spirit and energy into his labour. Even now, when politeness appeared to make a demand upon him to speak, he sat silent and abstracted. At last Helen asked,

“Have you a headache, Mr. West? If you have, I think I could manage——”

“I have not a headache, Miss Godfrey—only——”

"Only?" she repeated.

"Should not you like to be at home, with your mother, and the boys, and Lady Page?" he asked, with apparent abruptness of idea.

"Yes, I should, to-morrow. They will all dine at Lady Page's. Yes, I should like it—oh! so much. But I am enjoying myself here, too. Indeed, I have been so wonderfully busy all day, I have had no time to think of anything. How would this reflector look here, do you think?"

"There is nothing like work, is there, for exorcising all the evil spirits?" He smiled as he spoke, but the smile only seemed to render more marked the expression of pain she had already noticed in his face.

"Evil spirits! What evil spirits do you mean, Mr. West?"

"Regret, longing, remorse. But no such



spirits can molest you. You cannot imagine what it is to have your past life haunting you like an avenging spectre—hissing in your ear for ever, like the voice of a subtle tempter, ‘What is done cannot be undone!’”

He stopped suddenly, struck by Helen’s frightened, though interested countenance.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, dejectedly; “but holidays, and more especially Christmas holidays, do not agree with me.”

“I do not know, Mr. West, what your misfortunes or your errors may have been, but now—surely——”

She broke off. He had been leaning against the tall chimney-piece, with his face turned from her. Now he turned quickly round, and their eyes met. She almost fancied there were tears in his. His face was flushed.

"Yes, I will work, I will strive with every nerve, with every breath. I will despair no more. I will believe in myself. Miss Godfrey, do you believe in me?"

"I do believe in you. I feel as if I could not do otherwise."

"God reward you, Helen! I wish I had known you two years ago. I wish I had such a life to look back on as yours. I wish——"

He seemed suddenly to check the energy of his words. Perhaps he was aware of a sudden bustle at the door, which opened, and admitted at one burst the whole Higginson family. It was rather awkward to be caught thus, standing face to face by the fire, instead of being at work. To add to the awkwardness, Augustus was with the others. He had escaped in the afternoon from the decorations of St. Michael's Church, and the

circle of admiring young ladies at work upon them, to the decorations at home, and a flirtation with Helen Godfrey, which, compared with those offered to his choice in the vestry, had all the sting and sparkle of Champagne, contrasted with the vapid sweetness of eau sucrée.

“What, you here, West?” he said, and his tone hardly seemed quite civil. “I will help you to make the Prince of Wales’ feathers, Miss Godfrey.”

As he spoke, he placed a low chair for her, close by the tree, and, with the air of a privileged admirer, drew a stool for himself beside her, and seated himself, with a look of devotion which would have lifted a vestry young lady into the seventh heaven of gratified vanity. But it was lost on Helen, probably because her thoughts were otherwise engrossed.

She was answering mechanically Augustus's remarks about feather grass and holly berries, when Mr. Higginson, who had come into the room, beaming with good-humour, but who was now fidgeting up and down with a cloud on his brow, impatiently called out to Augustus,

"Come, Gus, I am sure you must have pricked your fingers over them cursed thorns, up at the shop there, more than enough for any reasonable parson. You come up with me now to the smoking-room and have a cigar."

"I don't want a cigar before dinner. I want to help Miss Godfrey. She cannot possibly do this in time without my help." Even Helen was aware of a certain defiance in his tone.

"I think I can finish it, or if not, the children will help me."

“How can they express my ideas? I am sure, Miss Godfrey, you would not deprive me of the pleasure of carrying out my views. Let West go with my father.”

“Shall I go with you, Mr. Higginson?” said the clerk, with ready acquiescence.

“No,” said Mr. Higginson curtly.

All the time Ethel said nothing, but sat with a face cloudy as a sky from which the lightning is about to flash. As for poor Mrs. Higginson, she looked round with bewilderment painted on her face. She had intended to have such a cosy, gossipy, social hour between the twilight and the firelight before the dinner, which was to take place at five o'clock to give time for the preparations for the children's party at seven. But, as if the “evil eye” had rested on them all, this cheerful, talkative family party had fallen asunder into a mere concurrence of hostile

units who sat glowering at one another like a party of inimical cats ready for a feline Sedan.

From face to face the good lady looked in amazement, and the result of her observations was summed up in the little word, "Law!" which, though only an interjection, no sane grammarian could on that occasion have denied to be a part of speech, if expressiveness, at least, be any criterion of a title to that dignity.

It was a great relief to everybody but Augustus when dinner was announced. Eating and dressing formed a not unpleasant resource for the rest of the interval before the guests arrived. It was to be a Smokeham party—the children of the richest Smokeham manufacturers and pit owners—just the occasion one would have expected for Ethel Higginson to enact her coldest and haughtiest.

But, on the contrary, she had seldom appeared more gracious. She presided herself over the Christmas tree, and one would have thought she had been born for the purpose of making herself agreeable to children.

Ethel called Augustus to help her to reach the higher branches, but he had secured a seat in a row of spectators immediately behind Helen Godfrey.

"There is West," he said; "I have been holding up my arms all day, and am quite worn out. To work me any more would merit a prosecution from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Do let me hold your glove, Miss Godfrey,"—for the sight of Mr. Higginson's angry face had made her drop it in the flurry and annoyance of the moment.

"No, I thank you," she said, colouring,

but with decision. "If you will let me out, I will go to Ada and Gerty. I see Ada wants to show me her new doll."

"You can't get out now. Never mind Ada. Don't go, Miss Godfrey: for my sake," he whispered.

A beseeching glance accompanied the words. He knew that either the words or the glance would have been all-potent with any of the young ladies whom he had left at work on St. Michael's decorations. Then he had such splendid sentimental dark eyes. It was not in woman's nature to resist them, he felt sure. But Helen at that moment was thinking less of the son's eyes than of the angry glances of the father, and she called out aloud—

"Mr. Higginson, will you kindly make way for me? I want to go to Gerty and Ada."



The paper-bag improver's face cleared up. He stretched out his own brawny fist to help her over the front form, and with a severe look at his son, he said to Helen—

“Upon my word, you really are a sensible girl, and you deserved a handsomer present than that brooch, though it did cost five-pound-ten.”

A speech which filled Helen with ineffable disgust and mortification. She went to look at Ada's doll, but it was well that Ada was too happy at that moment to be dependent on her governess's sympathy, for Helen could not have told whether its eyes were black or blue, as her own were too full of tears to see.

Then she could perceive Mr. West and Ethel by the tree, laughing and talking together—Ethel looking more brilliant than she had ever seen her before, and somehow

that did not please her either. The times were out of joint with Helen.

Mr. West conducted her in to supper. Mr. Higginson had told him to do so. Throughout that meal she was absent and thoughtful, and without appetite for the delicate viands with which her companion tried to tempt her. They returned to the drawing-room together by the long warm corridor, bright with lights, and scented with gorgeous exotics.

"I am afraid you are very tired, Miss Godfrey," he said, and there was a thrill of tenderness in his voice which seemed spontaneous rather than intentional.

"Yes. I—I should like to go to my own room ;" and he could hear that her voice trembled, and see that her eyes shone with the tears her pride could not altogether suppress.

“Dear Miss Godfrey,” said the clerk, enclosing the hand which rested on his arm in his, and looking at her with a whole world of expression. That look was potent to comfort. Her very soul rested on it. She had neither will nor wish of her own, or she would certainly have withdrawn her hand.

But he withdrew his, as if suddenly recollecting himself.

“I beg your pardon. This is the very last night on which I ought to have presumed; but I was so sorry.” His tone was penitent, but not without dignity.

Helen could not trust herself to make any rejoinder. She could only manage to say, “Good night.” It had been a night to her of the extremest vexation, crossed with moments of—of something which it vexed her more than anything else to think of now that she was alone.

A tradesman's clerk to presume! And yet she ought not to blame him. She remembered how she had gone up to him at the chimney-piece—the eagerness with which she had tried to comfort him. It was her own fault, and her face burnt with blushes at the recollection. “A man not even in her own rank of life!” At the time it had seemed to her only common humanity. Now she beheld the whole affair no longer through the promptings of her heart, but through the mental habits of her early training. She was angry too with the Higginsons. She might have known these purse-proud nouveaux riches would have despised her. Well, she despised them too.

Leaving poor Helen in this not altogether amiable frame of mind, and to a somewhat sleepless night, let us follow young West on his solitary walk back to the town. The

rest of the guests were already gone in carriages more or less splendid ; but even the humblest and the least of the party was of course too genteel to offer a seat to one of Mr. Higginson's junior clerks.

" Really," said the somewhat exclusive lady of a wholesale oil and colourman, whose fortune was making rapid advances towards being " colossal," " the Higginsons may talk of their fine society, but I would like to see one of our clerks daring to flirt with my daughter as he does with that stuck-up Miss Ethel. Well, pride comes before a fall."

So, as Augustus was to sleep that night at Belvidere Mansion, and as Mr. West was not genteel enough for the rest of the party, he set off alone.

If Helen had retreated to her luxurious bed-room, her heart ready to burst with the

## FATHER GODFREY.

contending forces of a house divided again itself, that of the young clerk as he walked out into the Winter night was very full too.

It was a cold night, a frost having set towards the afternoon. A bitter wind, avant-courrier of a storm, blew from wan regions of the Arctic snows, bearing its wings a great white cloud, through which the full moon looked like the face of a spectre through a winding-sheet. Mr. West buttoned his great-coat more closely over his chest, but did not walk so fast as one would have expected on a night so cold and dismal. Something fascinated him strangely in the dead, ice-bound world in the pale, dreary sky. It braced his body and mind. He had been wonderfully depressed

the earlier part of the day—possibly, as he himself had hinted, because he had had time for self-occupation. The crushing sense of shame which certain memories never failed to bring had been to-day more than usually powerful. Expiation had seemed so impossible; restitution so far off. It was in vain he recalled that miserable time in the hospital where he had been nursed by the good German deaconesses; or that even worse agony when he had stolen, a homeless beggar, to his father's home, and learned that to his parents his very existence was felt to be a curse; that he tried to assure himself he had made some progress towards the fulfilment of the vow he had then made. What was he but a poor struggling clerk, employed out of charity? What chance had he even to be anything else? It had seemed hopeless. Now faith returned with

his changed mood—faith in God's rule and man's endeavour.

With a firmer tread he quickened his steps over the hard, ringing roads, and his thoughts rested upon Helen Godfrey.

He ventured to tell himself now that that good, true woman, as little a bloodless picture of saintly selfishness as she was a luxurious pleasure-seeker, selfish and not saintly, had become part and parcel of his life. Her sympathy had restored his forfeited self-respect—and—and—it was sweet to owe anything to her. It did not even lessen the sweetness that he partly knew it had been unwillingly given.

Helen's nature was as clear as crystal. The mountain stream does not more distinctly discover in its limpid depths each rounded or whitened pebble than Helen's little prejudices and faults discovered themselves through her



transparent simple-mindedness. That innocent aristocratic pride, for instance, which always yielded in a moment to kindness or compassion, or any nobler feeling, how charming it was! Even that somewhat narrow religious creed—how wonderfully it adjusted itself to the wider demands of the heart that so eagerly held it. Only the purity and strength of evangelicalism, not its sternness and narrowness, seemed to adhere to Helen Godfrey then. She was so lovely!

The light of her brown eyes had the bountiful glow of sunny harvest days, the blush on her cheek the rich bloom of ripening fruit, and her very presence seemed to warm the heart like a household fire. He knew she was not always so pretty. In the wintry aspect of pride and neglect her beauty grew cold and pale—was hardly

beauty at all. He felt, or he fancied, that she never looked so well as when she was speaking to him. And that very night when he had, in a moment of weakness, which he hardly knew how to regret, held her hand, and looked into her eyes, a new and more touching loveliness had revealed itself. Ah! the very remembrance of it was—was——  
But it did not unnerve him.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## FATHER AND SON.

WHEN Augustus Higginson returned to the drawing-room, after seeing the guests into their carriages, he was disappointed to find that Helen Godfrey had gone to bed without even bidding him good night. His disappointment manifested itself chiefly in being very cross. Now the elder Mr. Higginson had been inclined to be cross too, but on the homœopathic principle of curing a complaint by a further application of its original cause, the sight of his son's perturbation had the effect of calming him into a

better humour. He, too, had had his eye on Helen Godfrey, and he had seen what his son had not seen ; he had seen her walking slowly along the corridor with the young clerk, and he believed he had seen the latter take her hand.

“What a capital thing that would be!” thought the paper-bag improver. “Rising young man! Business of his own some time or other! Governess! Young enough to wait—if only Gus would not be a fool!” And notions benevolent as well as selfish wove themselves into the web of Mr. Higginson’s thoughts.

- Augustus passed an excited, restless night.
- She could never prefer a clerk, a common, vulgar clerk, to him, a clergyman, young, rich, handsome, and fascinating. It was not conceivable. It was not endurable. No ; she had done it to pique him. But though

he assured himself of this, he was piqued notwithstanding. No clerk should triumph over him.

He did not indeed say to himself he was prepared to make any sacrifice ; but he had a vague vision of where his jealousy might lead him, and the sacrifice at this moment seemed by no means impossible. In short, he must deny himself on one side or the other—an unpleasant dilemma for Augustus Higginson, who was not prone to any greater self-denial than consists in dining on luxuriously cooked fish on fast-days, a sacrifice for which he was remunerated by the feeling that it was very ritualistic and distinguished. This feeling he called an “approving conscience.”

When he rose on the morning of Christmas Day and looked out of the window, the whole world was white with new-fallen

snow. It was what people call "A regular old-fashioned Christmas." Augustus felt that he rather liked it. It seemed mediæval and orthodox. A little calmer than he had been the previous night, for the longer he thought of it, the more monstrous it seemed that Miss Godfrey should prefer "that fellow West" to himself, he rose and dressed, and went downstairs.

He did not expect to see Helen before breakfast, as he knew the girls had early lessons. It had escaped him somehow that Christmas Day was a holiday. It was, therefore, a surprise, when he came down, to see Miss Godfrey alone at the far end of the corridor. She was hanging up a splendidly illuminated text, which had been considered inappropriate for the previous evening, but which she had promised Mrs. Higginson to put up herself the first thing in the morning. So intent was she on her

work, and so thickly carpeted was the long wide passage, that she did not hear him till he was close by her side.

"A merry Christmas, Miss Godfrey!" he said just over her head, for he was very tall. She looked suddenly up with a start which sent the blood to her face, and made her eyes shine in the gaslight.

"Good morning, Mr. Augustus. You quite frightened me."

"Frightened you! I would not frighten you for the world," he said, with more tenderness than originality, for his feelings towards Helen were, after all, not of that all-powerful nature which makes even men, who are not clever, original. But he had noticed the blush of surprise on her face, and his vanity had led him to construe it into meaning much more than mere surprise. Then, too, it made her look so pretty,

and her eyes were so soft and bright. The moment was tempting, and bending down close to the shining wavelets of her dark hair, he laid his hand on hers, which she was again raising to give a finishing touch to the adjustment of the text, and held it close in his grasp..

She drew it away with a hasty movement, so that her face almost came in contact with his.

“What do you mean?” she said indignantly, and almost ready to cry.

“What should I mean, dearest Helen? What could I mean, but that I love you?”

Again he tried to take her hand, and even to enclose her with his arm; and though she tried to pass him, he stood in her way.

“Nonsense, Mr. Augustus Higginson! How dare——”



"How dare I love you? Because I cannot help it, Helen."

"I have given you no right to speak so to me, Mr. Augustus Higginson, and you ought to know me better than to make me the object of this foolish trifling."

Now Augustus had never gone so far in flirtation with any girl before, to his credit be it said; but this had been his greatest temptation, and he would have liked—yes, he would have liked, if he might have enjoyed a little of this sweetness of love-making without—without exactly—not of course that he meant really to trifle with the affections of Helen Godfrey, but——It was evident however, whether he meant it or not, it would not be permitted to him.

She again made an attempt to pass him, her whole face and figure exalted, as it were, by a sense of just displeasure. It seemed to

him she had never looked so pretty. She was dressed in some material, soft in texture, and dark in colour, but giving out, where the light fell, a ruby glow. The illuminated wall behind her, and the bright hues of the hot-house flowers around, gave that amount of colour which seemed to draw forth a kind of beauty latent in her among neutral tints, and in passionless moments.

He could not let her go. And then that despicable clerk !

“I don't know what you mean by trifling. You are trifling, Miss Helen Godfrey. I love you better than I ever loved anybody. Won't you have me, Helen, for your husband?” The reproachful tone melted again into passion. She looked so very nice, and failure was not to be endured. He had taken both her hands, but she drew them away.

"I won't, indeed," she said; but as there was less displeasure in her tone, he did not notice that there was equal decision.

At this very moment the door of a room half-way along the corridor was opened, and out came the master of the house himself. Helen darted past Augustus, and before Mr. Higginson could address her, was through a door which led to a back staircase. She had no sooner accomplished this escape than she felt it would have been more dignified to have remained. Then she remembered that Augustus was not the only person who had taken her hand; and with that other person she had not felt angry. Yet, in every sense, had not Augustus the better right? Whatever his parents might be, he was a clergyman and a gentleman, and—a good young man. By his own confession Mr. West had not always been good. Why was it that his

passionate contrition interested her more than the blamelessness of Augustus? Was it very wicked? Was she bewitched?

The storm which Helen had eluded burst upon Augustus.

"Come here, Gus!" cried his father. "I insist on your coming this moment!" and he moved back into the room, his son constrained to follow, and feeling not unlike the same naughty boy he had felt when his mother had once, in the humble years now gone by, discovered him feasting on the sugar in the grocery cupboard.

It was his father's private room into which he was conducted. Some little time back this room had been known as "the study," on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle probably; for Mr. Higginson's studies were confined to the newspapers, business circulars, or an occasional blue-book, and were usual-

ly prosecuted not here, but in spare moments in his private apartment at the counting-house. But when, a short while ago, through the interest of Sir Anthony Hayward with the Lord Lieutenant, he had attained to the long coveted honours of the magistracy, his private room had been suddenly converted into a "justice room," by which title it was now reverentially mentioned by Mrs. Higginson, and alluded to in as matter-of-course a tone by Augustus and Ethel as if their father had been born to the dignity.

It was a comfortable though not large room, with a lofty ceiling, heavy green draperies, and padded leather chairs, each a very "sleepy hollow," whose allurements might have seduced St. Catharine of Sienna herself into a nap of longer duration than the one quarter of an hour she permitted herself during our earth's diurnal tour in

space. The handsomest and most complete of writing-tables stood in front of a blazing fire, reflected all round by the polished steel grate. Mr. Higginson had put out the gas before he left the room, and the pallid twilight of the snowy Christmas morning fell upon the handsome, half angry, half guilty face of the young parson, and on the gigantic figure and determined countenance of his father. The son looked yellow, the father purple, in that unbecoming, snow-reflected light.

"Now, Gus," said the latter, in the voice of a Stentor, "what the devil is the meaning of all this?"

"The meaning of all what, sir?"

"All what? It's no use trying to throw dust in my eyes. There must be an end of all this philandering with your sister's governess, and that pretty sharply too, or

by Jingo! she shall be packed off to her beggarly home this very day!"

Now, not only did the tenor of this speech rouse the young man's temper, but its tone shocked his taste.

"Pray, sir," he cried, growing yet paler as his father grew redder with rage, "speak more respectfully of the young lady who is to be your daughter-in-law."

"My daughter-in-law! There are more words than one to that bargain, I reckon. The little jade!—who would have thought she was so deep? But she has not hooked you yet; and, by Jove!—" he stopped with a determined face.

"I will not hear anyone speak of Miss Godfrey in such terms. If I have gained her love, it is because I have sought it. Is it so strange that she should love me?" For Augustus had really no doubt that her coy-

ness proceeded only from a want of faith in her good luck.

Now Mr. Higginson was not, as the world goes, an unjust man, and even in the proverbial blindness of his anger caught a glimmer of Helen's blamelessness; but it only increased his indignation at his son.

"You have sought her, you say! What, have I worked hard to make a fine gentleman of you," he continued, with that mingled pride and contempt which he always seemed to feel in his son's finery and uselessness, "that you should throw yourself away on a penniless governess? For my part I thought young West was sweet upon her, and that she did not object to it."

Short-sighted Mr. Higginson! Augustus flushed up, and his eye sparkled.

"Insolent cad!—what right has he to lift his eyes to Miss Godfrey?"



“As good a right as anybody else, I should say, if she gives him leave to. He is a likely lad, and works with a will, and if she marries him, she may ride in her carriage yet before she is as old as your mother; and let me tell you, Gus,” he continued, with a sort of relenting towards Helen, “it is not fair of you to spoil her market, when it is impossible you can marry her yourself.”

“But I will marry her myself! The whole world shall not prevent me!”

“Marry her, then!” roared the father, in a rage which capped that of his son; “but remember, if you do, you must live on your curacy—I swear it!”

It may be imagined that the breakfast-table at Belvidere Mansion on that Christmas morning did not present the most sociable of family parties. Mrs. Higginson

quickly perceived that both her husband and son were out of sorts, even dimly suspected, from certain little indications, that they had had a quarrel. Mr. Higginson sat and devoured game-pie in huge mouthfuls, with a portentous redness of face, and savage curt-ness of rejoinder, when anybody was valorous enough to address him. Augustus took one delicate viand after another on his plate, found fault with everything, and ate nothing.

Ethel was silent and absent; and Miss Godfrey sent down to say she had a bad headache, and begged to be excused coming down, as she did not want any breakfast.

"Breakfast, or no breakfast," said Mr. Higginson, breaking his surly silence with an absolute ferocity of tone, as this message was delivered, "I must trouble her to speak a word with me presently in the justice-room."

"Law, Mr. 'Igginson!" said his wife, looking up in amazement; but she durst say no more.

He had returned to the deglutition of game-pie like a wild beast in a menagerie. It was "fressen, nicht essen," and his wife felt instinctively that to interrupt him would be dangerous. She sought the face of her son, but his angry eyes, and his lips white and quivering, were equally alarming. Then all at once the truth flashed upon her, and she, too, grew pale with dismay. It had flashed on some one else also.

Ethel, if she continued silent, was no longer absent. She did not believe Helen loved her brother, but she never doubted she would marry him. Strange to say, though it was just the sort of thing she would have done herself, at this moment she despised her for it. A sort of haughty triumph lighted up her face. She began to

talk and eat, as if excited and nervous from some sudden sense of relief.

She passed Helen Godfrey in the corridor, as the latter was on her way to obey the summons of Mr. Higginson.

“Good morning, Miss Godfrey,” she said, with a thrill of contempt in her tone, of which Helen wholly mistook the source, and which sent her into the justice-room in her mightiest and most magnificent of moods. She felt emphatically, as she had felt on the night of her arrival, that she was a lady, and that the whole Higginson family were—what she might have expected.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## HELEN'S CHRISTMAS MEDITATIONS.

IT was broad daylight now in Mr. Higginson's justice-room, or at least such breadth of daylight as can be obtained on an "old-fashioned" snow-bedecked Christmas morning, with an atmosphere like frozen milk, or snow enchanted into stillness in its fall. No sun could so much as manifest even a sickly, beamless face through that frosty fog, which, "dark with excess of whiteness," was yet transforming the bare, brown world into a sparkling fairyland, all rich and rare with silver chasing, as if one

walked about among branched epergnes of Brobdingnagian magnitude.

There was yet no sunshine, therefore, to mitigate the rather awful aspect of the magnificent furniture; and the walls almost vanished into darkness ere they reached the shadowy height of the ceiling. Like the comforting face of a friend, seemed the ruddy welcome of the fire to the beating heart of Helen Godfrey. How angry she was with herself that her heart did beat! And what was worst of all, she fancied Mr. Higginson saw that she was nervous, for his look, which had been red and pugnacious as she entered the room, all at once assumed the lofty, judicial aspect of the sovereign who beholds before him the confessed culprit, with whom he may deal according to his pleasure.

"Now, Miss Godfrey," said Mr. Higgin-

son, en grand seigneur, and yet with a certain encouragement of tone (for though inclined to be a despot, he belonged to that better class of despots who are propitiated, and not infuriated, by submission), "what is the meaning of all this nonsense between you and my son?"

"There is nothing whatever that I know of, Mr. Higginson, between your son and myself."

"Come now, miss, that won't do. Don't you think I am so green as you take me for. Did not I see him this very morning with my own eyes holding your hands and looking into your face; and if there was nothing between you, I ask, was that pretty behaviour in a well-brought-up young lady?"

Helen coloured scarlet. Most girls, not of the period, would have coloured at such

an accusation, and Helen's modesty, as well as her pride, was sensitive beyond the average. But Mr. Higginson was in the mood to see only guilt in her blushes, though he was far from viewing that guilt in the heinous light in which she would have seen it herself, had it really existed.

"Now, then, will you say there is nothing between you? Don't you expect him to marry you?"

"No, Mr. Higginson, I neither expect it nor wish it."

He was staggered for a moment, for Helen had partly recovered herself, and there was sincerity in her tone, which impressed even Mr. Higginson.

"Has he not proposed to you, then?"

"Not in earnest, I think," she said; for to this opinion, in which for the moment she had been shaken, she had returned



again. A flush of displeasure flitted over her face, and there was a thrill of indignation in her voice. Now Mr. Higginson understood, or thought he understood, her. Should he tell her she was right—that his son had made a fool of her? It would answer his purpose, he saw plainly. But, after all, the paper-bag maker was in the main an honest man—honest after a hard every-one-for-himself fashion.

He felt a little nettled, too, that she should have thought Augustus capable of such conduct. It was not pleasant that anyone should see his son even as he saw him.

“You are wrong there, Miss Godfrey. Augustus is not quite such a flirt as to make an offer of marriage in jest. But it would not answer your purpose to marry him for all that. I have other views for him, and will give him nothing unless he pleases me.”

"You may be sure, Mr. Higginson," said Helen, mounting the very highest horse in her stud, which was by no means poor in the lofty breed, "that I shall never interfere with your views. I have no wish to marry your son, and though I hardly thought him in earnest, I told him so. But if he is in earnest, I am sorry to disappoint him, and I wish I had spoken more kindly to him."

Mr. Higginson opened wide his eyes at this assertion, which somehow he could not disbelieve. Yet it was not so pleasant to him as it ought to have been, perhaps because it totally disarranged the part he had designed to play. Or could it be that he did not like to see his son fail in the career in which he had been deemed most fitted to succeed? If Augustus had not succeeded in love-making, in what should he succeed?

He had not taken honours at college, though that ought to have been easy in comparison with improving paper-bags; and of course his university education had unfitted him for anything sensible and money-making—match-making alone excepted. But all at once an excuse for his son's failure presented itself to his mind. He had been forestalled. These cogitations had made Mr. Higginson pause, and Helen, after waiting for a minute or two, said proudly,

"I suppose, Mr. Higginson, as you must now be satisfied, I may go?"

Her pride became her, as all emotion did, and in that moment of relief Mr. Higginson felt there was much to excuse his son.

"Yes, my dear, you may go, but not this way. I am sorry if I have vexed you, for I see you have behaved like the

good, sensible lass I always thought you."

But this "amende" had not the effect it was intended to have ; but rather deepened the insult, to Helen's way of looking at things. She went up to her own room with a proud, bursting heart. To go to church was impossible, she felt ; and she spent the Christmas morning in a way that at any other time, or in any other person, she would have highly disapproved. First she wrote a note to Mrs. Higginson (a haughty, polite note at the beginning, but softening into affection at the end), giving up her situation. Then she wrote a letter to Lady Page, telling her what she had done, promising a full explanation, and begging her to communicate the matter to her mother. These matters of business accomplished, she sat down to think ; not of the shepherds on Bethlehem's plains, or the song

of the angels, but of more recent and less heavenly matters. She looked round the pleasant room she had come to consider her own, and to which she had so often returned happy, and conscious of a life not without purpose. The little girls, too, were fond of her; and Mrs. Higginson was so kind, she felt almost ungrateful. Her eyes slowly filled with tears. It was far indeed from being a merry Christmas.

Deep down, too, in her heart, even in her consciousness, lay another feeling. Yes, it would be better for her to be away from Smokeham. But would such absence be pleasant? Would it even be bearable?

## CHAPTER XV.

## IT RAINS.

**B**UT pleasant, or bearable, or otherwise, it was finally decided she was to go; and Augustus, in the meantime, was to take a tour in Spain—a step he was only to be persuaded to by a letter written by Helen herself, at the instigation of his father. Helen agreed to write this letter on the one condition, that its composition was to be left entirely in her own hands. The morning after he received it, he departed, “in the dumps,” as his father phrased it; but by the time he had reached Madrid, he had evi-

dently, in a great measure, come out of the unpleasant mental phase so specified, as he wrote from thence a perfectly pleasant letter to his mother. And, to anticipate a little, when, at the end of some months, he once more sought shelter under the shadow of the paternal minarets, he coloured with an ingenuousness that was not unbecoming, as his father said, with a knowing look, and surveying him from head to foot :

“ Well, Gus !”

Then, looking one another in the face, they both laughed.

“ She was a nice girl,” said Augustus.

“ She was a nice girl,” agreed the paper-bag manufacturer ; “ I shall never say a word against that. We owe her a deal.”

This assertion passed uncontradicted. Seen in the presence of the “ Immensities,” Augustus Higginson was doubtless some-

what a poor young man ; but looking at him beside those average specimens of humanity composing for the most part one's visiting list, I am not sure that he was much worse than some of his neighbours.

Helen's last three months at Belvidere Mansion were a dull time indeed. The days were short and dreary, and the domestic atmosphere was nearly as dull as the smoke-darkened, fog-oppressed element outside. Once or twice Mr. West came to dinner, but on these occasions Helen did not dine at table, and it was late in the evening before she made her appearance.

Ever since that night in the corridor, a sort of impalpable constraint had arisen between them. It seemed to be neither affront nor coldness, nor anything to which it would be possible to give a specific name, yet it acted as a separation. Mr. West's



manner, on the few occasions on which they were thrown together, was characterised by a degree of what she felt to be tender respect; but the old easy, friendly chat was over. It was a comfort, however, that he did not despise her for her weakness. He was "a—a very sensible young man, and doubtless saw what was becoming in their respective positions." But Helen could not help feeling, as a sort of drawback to the satisfaction conveyed by this view of the question, that it would have been, under the circumstances, the right thing that *she*, rather than *he*, should have seen this.

Then he and Ethel seemed greater friends than ever. There was something in her face and manner, when engaged in conversation with her father's clerk, Helen had never seen in them before. Certainly she noticed nothing corresponding in his, no-

thing but a willing politeness. Yet altogether, when she watched these two, she was not happy—hardly amiable. If they would only not sit together and talk so happily before her very eyes!

One night, after an evening spent by Mr. West at Belvidere Mansion, she had been lying awake, her whole being filled with this passionate wish. How sweet, amidst all its annoyance, had been that moment in the corridor, on Christmas Eve! Now she knew it had been the sweetest moment of her life. But it would never occur again. Oh! how could she ever have dared to say to herself she hoped it never would. Too hot and sleepless to lie still, she sprang out of bed—her head aching with the images which chased one another through her brain. The fire was dying out, but the embers still glowed in the darkness. As she bent over them,

she suddenly kissed one of her own hands—the hand he had once held in his.

His good-night had been gentle, almost deprecating, yet he had not looked at her, and Ethel had called him away, probably to tell him she was leaving home for a few days. Their parting interview had seemed very friendly. Ethel had smiled, if not blushed. Running to the window, Helen drew up the blind. On the blackness of darkness which represented the sky, she could see in one quarter the pale reflection of the Smokeham lights. Oh, if she could only read the secret of one heart in that sleeping town!

Reason said that it was perhaps better she could not. She was going away, and would hear him and see him no more. She must school herself—she would school herself to bear the inevitable. She would begin at once.

The most obvious way of beginning this discipline seemed to be by returning to bed. This she did heroically, resolving also to go to sleep. But sleep, like most courted visitors, is apt to be coy and capricious. It came not at Helen's call. In spite of herself, the tears flowed fast, and Mrs. Higginson's favourite Shanghae cock was thinking of his matitutinal performance on that famous poetical instrument, his "shrill clarion," ere the weary depression gave place to forgetfulness.

The next day was a half holiday in the schoolroom. Ethel had gone off in the morning to pay a visit of a few days to a family of some importance in the neighbourhood, Mrs. Higginson took the two little girls out with her in the carriage, and Helen thought she would walk in to Smokeham, to purchase a few trifles, which she tried to

persuade herself she could not do without. But the truth was, she could not settle to any sedentary employment, even of a mechanical nature, still less, to any demanding mental self-possession.

This afternoon it did not rain or snow, and the roads were almost dry. But sour, dense vapours so completely hid the sky as to require some faith still to believe

"That behind the clouds  
Is the sun still shining."

A uniform grimness in the heavens above and in the earth beneath, seemed to pervade the universe. The prospect of a solitary walk to Smokeham was doubtless a little dismal, still any movement was preferable to sitting still; and shrouded in a waterproof, and armed with an umbrella—for sooner or later it was evident that the sullen superincumbent mass must give way—Helen start-

ed on her walk. She had purchased the ribbons and pins which she had assured herself were so absolutely necessary, and was returning along the "Regent Street" or "Bond Street" of Smokeham, mechanically glancing as she passed at the shop windows, and half-consciously recognising the fact that "high-crowned hats seemed more worn than ever," when the first drop of rain began to fall, large and chilly. Helen quickened her pace. It was a long way back to Belvidere Mansion, and she had no friend with whom she could take shelter. There was a nearer way through the town she knew than that by the wide main streets. Ethel had once taken her that way on foot, when they had feared they might be too late for dinner. She thought she would try now ; for not only was it a short cut, but seeming to be a quarter inhabited by the respectable poor,

it would be easier to find shelter than in the great streets, where the tall, closed doors frowned an inexorable prohibition to enter.

Turning down a paved passage between the grim, eyeless heights formed by the ends of two great houses, she found herself in a region of mews, and, a little further removed from the great thoroughfares, amid a street of inferior market-gardens. These gardens were bordered by rows of mean red houses, presenting an unvaried monotony of shallow windows and doorways, and eaveless, blue-slatted roofs. They could not indeed have been more exactly like one another, had they been inches on a foot rule. Helen was threading her way along a narrow paved path between the gardens and houses, when it began to rain in earnest. A woman, with her apron over her head, darted out of one of the houses, apparently to inspect the tap of

her water-butt, and ran against Helen, who was passing at the moment.

“Beg your pardon, miss. I thought as how one of them children had turned the tap, and I takes in washing. It do rain! Won’t you step in a bit, miss?”

Quite grateful for this invitation, Helen accepted it at once. The little kitchen into which she was ushered was close by the door, and was literally crowded with fat children of various sizes, but all with the same sort of round-eyed, broad, good-natured countenances. A tremendous Babel of sounds ceased at Helen’s entrance, as if some sudden spell had fallen on the miniature crowd, who, with furtive glances from behind doors, and tables, and their mother’s apron, stared at her with mingled shyness and curiosity.

“It allus rains after school-hours,” remark-



ed the mother, apologetically, and as if she considered it rather an unreasonable arrangement. "Would you step up to the parlour, miss? His Reverence won't be in this hour yet."

Helen hesitated. She felt she was probably a good deal in the way.

"You are sure the gentleman won't come home? I should not like to intrude."

"No, miss; and he'd make you heartily welcome if he did," her hostess answered, rather exaggerating the faith she really to some extent felt in both assertions. But the worry and clamour of the children was great, and she wanted to get on with her ironing before tea, at the same time that she was anxious to shelter the pretty, pleasant-spoken young lady from the rain which fell thicker and more determinedly than ever. It was with a cheerful face, there-

fore, as Helen consented, that she bustled up before her to show the way, and to see "as the fire was a-burning."

Helen followed her up the steep, narrow stairs, and into the little square parlour, so clean, yet so mean and tasteless. Her eye, as she entered, fell on the old leather arm-chair by the writing-table, already described in an earlier chapter, and a perplexing sense of something at once strange and familiar took possession of her. In an absent way she heard the landlady invite her to make herself comfortable, then close the door hurriedly, as she hastened down to the ironing and the children, who were once more filling the house with a mighty din.

As the door closed Helen's eyes lifted themselves from the arm-chair, and were arrested by the print of the Cathedral suspended over the mantelpiece. So strong

an agitation shook her nerves and bewildered her sight that at first she could hardly see the photographs hanging beside it, which she had hastened forward to examine.

Yet there they were, and other mementoes of home—trifling, but evidently cherished. He had not forgotten them. How could she ever believe he had?

She sat down in the arm-chair. How natural, and yet how unnatural it felt to be sitting in it again! On the table were one or two letters, ready for the post, and on the desk an unfinished sermon. Helen stooped down and kissed the handwriting. With boundless impatience she waited the sound of the well-known step. She never thought of asking herself if he would be pleased to see her. She knew he would.

All at once she seemed to be enlightened as to how he had felt, and what he had suf-

ferred. If he were a Jesuit, Jesuits could not be what people thought them. Inconsequential Helen! Yet possibly as near the truth as if every step of the way had been paved with syllogisms.

## CHAPTER XVI.

MR. SUMMERWOOD'S HEART SWELLS WITH  
MAGNANIMITY.

THE Foxleys had been for some time settled in Smokeham, in that same street sacred to gentility of the struggling, dismal cast, in which stood the Roman Catholic chapel where Elfrida had sought shelter from the storm on the occasion which had so changed the complexion of her faith.

Here Mrs. Foxley worked with unremitting industry at that branch of fancy work in which she was so skilful as to be almost original. Mrs. Higginson had been

as good as her word in procuring her the custom of the ladies of the rich Smokeham manufacturers, and she also sent her abundance of garden stuff, and occasionally hampers with poultry and other delicacies, which the "decayed gentlewoman" could not be supposed to afford to buy.

"What would my poor Geoffrey have said?" thought Mrs. Foxley, with a half-guilty feeling, as she accepted this—charity, it almost seemed. But it was such a help to her narrow housekeeping! And so she struggled on, the same brave, industrious woman she had always been. She was not unhappy. Such persons never are unhappy. Each day of difficulties successfully tided over, the solution of each successive problem of how to compel those divergent, wayward ends to meet, brought with it a glow of something not unlike triumph. Though a

very poor and colourless life, and altogether deficient in the dignity of uselessness, it was not invaded by ennui, its vitality did not require to be galvanized into sensation by tales addressed to that region of the brain which links us with the lower creation rather than with that which bears, however imperfectly, the image of the Creator.

The Higginsons, too, would willingly have had Elfrida and her mother to their house, and introduced them to their society. Poor as Mrs. Foxley was, Mrs. Higginson was aware it would have been very "genteel" to have her for a guest; and Elfrida's beauty would have added distinction to any party. But Elfrida shunned such distinction, and only for her sake could her mother have borne to face society in her altered position. After they came to Smokeham, Elfrida was more helpful, more like other

people than she had been for a long time.

She would marry Mr. Summerwood, her mother thought, and settle down to embroider vestments, and play chants upon harmoniums, as the business of her life. After all, for Elfrida it did not seem an unsuitable destiny; and though Mrs. Foxley could not have tolerated Mr. Summerwood for a husband herself, she knew in a certain sense he would perform his duty in that capacity. What she had once so much disliked, she now heartily desired.

They were sitting together at work one morning, after they had been in Smokeham about a month, Elfrida hemming a white tucker; for lately she had made several little efforts at being useful, when quite suddenly she began:

“Mamma, I want to tell you something.”

Mrs. Foxley looked up, expectation in her



eyes, and encouragement in her face. It flashed across her that Elfrida might have had a letter from Mr. Summerwood. Elfrida's colour came and went. She spoke and looked nervously.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Foxley.

"Mamma, I have made up my mind to a very solemn step. I intend to become a member of the Holy Catholic Church. There is no other true church."

Had an infernal machine or a mitrailleuse suddenly blown up the whole of that distastefully-genteel street, and left Mrs. Foxley sitting among the débris, like Marius (who must have been as fond of theatrical effect as a Frenchman, when he established himself in that famous historical pose amid the ruins of Carthage), she could hardly have been more astonished and shocked. For some seconds she could not speak. At last

she said, somewhat scornfully; for it did appear such rubbish among the laborious realities of her own practical life—

“What new whim is this? Did you never hear that a rolling stone gathers no moss?”

Poor Elfrida! It had required such an effort to make the confession, which had been urged upon her by the priest, and her whole panting little heart had been so eagerly in it. She had so hoped for a little sympathy, or, at least, tenderness. Like most weak-nerved, timid people, want of sympathy made her irritable, because she was so dependent upon it. At her mother's answer, she burst into tears. To her mother, her weeping seemed as the weeping of an unreasonable baby crying for the moon, or for the illuminated globe of the lamp, to play with.

"What would Mr. Summerwood say?" continued Mrs. Foxley.

"I don't care what he would say. He could give me no comfort, because his church has none to give." There was a chord of pettish superiority in her tone as she rose and ran out of the room, to shed floods of tears in the privacy of her own little bed-chamber, before her crucifix. Everybody—everybody but one—had always been harsh to her. As she thought of him now—of that wise, holy man to whom it appeared God, or more probably the Blessed Virgin herself, had led her, she became calm and comforted. For her Father Godfrey was the embodiment of the all-embracing love of the Catholic Church—of its benignant yet awful power to bind and loose. His word was law, as Mr. Summerwood's had once

been ; but it was law divested of its terrors. His presence was power, but it was power to console : the very thought of him was strength. As an infant reposes in the lap of its mother, so Elfrida rested on the decisions of Father Godfrey—in trust without a doubt—in peace without a care.

No more passed that day between the mother and daughter. Elfrida was too timid, and had been too much wounded, to begin again upon the subject. She also wanted to consult the priest first. In the evening Mrs. Foxley wrote to Mr. Summerwood a long and confidential letter ; for in this unexpected crisis she, too, wanted advice and support. How she wished Elfrida had only married him long ago !

In the morning Elfrida went out—she often did in the morning—to St. Michael's Church, Mrs. Foxley had hitherto believed,

but she now found it was to the little Popish chapel in the street where they lived. She came home very gentle and subdued, and sought to propitiate her mother by various little attentions. Mrs. Foxley was touched and softened ; for whenever she was not irritated by her, her heart yearned towards her daughter. She fancied now that she wished to show that she was sorry for yesterday, and had given up "that Roman Catholic nonsense."

But the truth was, Elfrida had been to confession, and the priest had advised her to be very tender and submissive with her mother, had explained to her that she ought to feel for the prejudices of the latter, and in every way to adorn her new profession.

The poor loving mother, in the midst of her needlework, and her heart full of grati-

tude to her daughter for being kind and reasonable, set a chair for her by the fire, and made her a cup of warm tea, saying,

“You look so cold and weary, dear. Drink this—it will do you good.”

She remembered, not without a slight sting of hardly necessary remorse, how she had promised to herself, when her Geoffrey was dying, that she would never again be impatient with Elfrida.

Elfrida sat down in the chair and drank the tea, and thought to herself—not how kind her mother was, but how pleased Father Godfrey would be that she should obey him so well. She did feel very tired; but the little glow of conscious merit did her spirits good.

“Elfrida, dear,” said her mother gently, “I have been writing to your good friend the Rector. He will soon put all right,

dear, won't he? You are happiest and best when you are with him, are you not?"

Elfrida started up from her chair by the fire, spilling her tea in the agitation of the moment.

"Oh, mamma! why have you done that?" and she burst into tears.

"You used to be so fond of him. I cannot understand how anybody can be so changeable."

"But you have changed too, mamma. You used not to like him."

"He was so kind when I needed kindness, that I have just cause for changing. He has always taken the deepest interest in you, Elfrida."

But before Elfrida could answer, the not very common sound of a cab in that semi-deserted street was heard rapidly approaching. It drew up at Mrs. Foxley's door, and

out of it stepped quickly Mr. Summerwood in person, looking as self-possessed and imposing as ever.

Half an hour ago, Mrs. Foxley would have hailed his arrival as a deliverance. Now it seemed only an additional embarrassment. Elfrida became very pale, and trembled all over. She felt like a runaway slave, who hears the shout of the pursuer close by his ear when he is within a few yards of the frontier. She had always felt that nobody could dare to oppose Mr. Summerwood. His reign, even when she had most eagerly courted it, had been in some sort a reign of terror. No—nobody could oppose him, unless—unless it were Father Godfrey. If she were to see the Rector again, she knew she should be dragged back body and soul under his dominion.

Before Mrs. Foxley had time to recover



from her surprise, Elfrida had darted out of the room. Her black dress was disappearing round the turn of the stairs, as the maid-of-all-work admitted the Rector of Willesmere. In the meantime, Mrs. Foxley had been reflecting that it would be better, after all, to see Mr. Summerwood alone first.

They had a grave interview, not without some implied rebuke on the Rector's part, that she had not exercised more maternal vigilance and parental authority; for when it was in his favour, Mr. Summerwood approved of the exercise of parental authority.

Poor Mrs. Foxley could ill brook the tone of superiority he seemed to assume in speaking to her. It was harder to bear than Mrs. Higginson's patronage. "If poor Geoffrey had only been alive," she thought. She longed to tell Mr. Summerwood that the Colonel and she had never approved of

many of Elfrida's religious practices, and that it was he himself who had been the cause of their permitting her to consult her own opinions rather than theirs. But she had just sufficient self-command and worldly wisdom to refrain. He continued magnanimously.

"But we shall soon, I trust, repair all that, and we must be more careful for the future. In fact," he continued, while his auditress inwardly chafed, "the sooner I take the sweet child under my own guardianship, it will, I see, be the better for her. She requires wise guidance. My good friend Miss Blagrove even was not quite the person, and in a position of power, as is usual with her sex, is apt to be a little arrogant."

"I wonder if it is only her sex that is apt to be arrogant?" thought Mrs. Foxley,

but she bit her lip to keep herself quiet.

“And now, my dear madam, I should like to see our wandering lamb. Do not fear but that I shall soon bring her back to the fold.” So said Mr. Summerwood, remembering those old days when he had been listened to as if he had been a manifestation of the Deity. That Elfrida had strayed was all the mismanagement of other people. He was confident in his special power over her, as well as in his general power to set everything to rights.

In the prospect of his approaching triumph, he was thinking of how tender he would be in his blame to the fluttering dove, how he would heal the wounds his disapprobation could not fail to make, with offering her his love and protection. And how forbearing he had been towards her mother! His heart was yet swelling with all this conscious

virtue and intended magnanimity, when the servant who had been sent to desire Elfrida to come down, returned to say Miss Foxley was not in her room. She thought she must have gone out ; for her hat and jacket, which had been lying on the bed since she last came in, were again gone.

Mr. Summerwood's face grew dark. At that moment Mrs. Foxley shrank from the idea of entrusting him with her daughter. She went hastily upstairs, and on the table found a slip of paper, on which was written, "I cannot see Mr. Summerwood. I am going to the Church of the Holy Cross till he is gone."

It was strange to Mrs. Foxley that Mr. Summerwood seemed considerably appeased by the perusal of this scrap.

"The dear little thing is afraid of my displeasure," he said ; "I shall soon show her

she need not fear me." And he luxuriated in the idea of the happiness he was about to bestow. How becoming that sudden relief—that sudden change from fear to joy, would be to her loveliness! Yes, it was sweet to Mr. Summerwood to feel that she had feared him—as sweet to Mr. Summerwood as it had been offensive to Leigh Wynford.

But what was to be done next? was the question which now presented itself for prompt decision. Mr. Summerwood did not think of consulting Mrs. Foxley. It was for his superior wisdom to decide.

"By far the best way will be for me to see this priest who has worked upon the pious fears of our sweet Elfrida. Stay, you had better go with me, as you are her mother. You can support me with the authority the law gives you."

Only half satisfied with the part assigned to her, Mrs. Foxley consented. She felt she must submit to any means by which she could hope to save her daughter. Strange and bitter as it seemed, she knew she had no influence herself.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## TAKING THE BULL BY THE HORNS.

THEY stopped at the Chapel of the Holy Cross. There was no service going on, and a woman who was coming out as they passed told them the priest was not there.

"Is there anyone within?" asked Mrs. Foxley.

"Yes, ma'am—a young lady and another person."

Mrs. Foxley, on the impulse of the moment, was preparing to enter, when Mr. Summerwood stopped her.

"It would be better not to make a scene in the church," he said, with superior wisdom.

She saw at once he was right, but felt annoyed that he was. The woman then directed them how to find their way to the priest's lodgings—Mr. Godfrey, she said, was his name.

Mr. Godfrey was at home; and Mr. Summerwood, sending up his card, was at once admitted into the parlour with the red roses and blue convolvuli stretching their necks out of brown gothic windows. Mr. Godfrey was seated at his writing-desk, but rose on their entrance and bowed.

Mrs. Foxley at least felt he was not at all the sort of person she had expected to see. Even Mr. Summerwood might have had a momentary impression of the same nature, but he was much less open to



influences of a personal character, or indeed to candid influences of any kind. He did possibly find his business a shade less easy to announce than he had anticipated. He began—

“I believe I address Mr. Godfrey?”  
Again the latter bowed.

“Mrs. Foxley!” continued Mr. Summerwood, introducing his companion, and feeling that her name would be abundantly significant. He watched the priest’s face. It remained perfectly unmoved. Acknowledging the introduction with grave politeness, he offered Mrs. Foxley a seat, but Mr. Summerwood answered for her—

“Thank you, we prefer standing.”

The blood mounted to Mrs. Foxley’s face, and she had at once an intuitive conviction that Mr. Godfrey perceived that she was annoyed. In spite of her wish to think

otherwise, she felt that there was feeling, as well as self-possession, in the grave glance of his dark eyes.

“And now, Mr. Godfrey,” said Mr. Summerwood, “I feel sure you can be at no loss to guess the motive of our visit.” So he spoke; but his manner said, “But I expect you will say you are, for all that.”

“I am at no loss to guess Mrs. Foxley’s, certainly; but, unless you are here at her request, I can form no conjecture as to the nature of yours.”

“You acknowledge, then, that, through your secret tampering with her religious feelings, a young lady has been perverted from the faith in which she was educated, and induced, without the knowledge of her mother, to unite herself to the Church of Rome?”

“I acknowledge nothing of the sort—still

less do I acknowledge your right to demand from me any acknowledgment whatever. I am ready to give this lady, Mrs. Foxley, any information in my power with regard to what, I feel, must be to her a distressing circumstance; but, unless it is by her expressed wish, I do not feel called upon to give it in the presence of a third person."

As he spoke, a tinge of colour came into his face, but there was no other indication of the anger he felt. He turned once more, pointedly, to Mrs. Foxley.

"I do wish it," she said; but her manner was uneasy. Every moment increased her unwilling respect for the priest.

"My narrative will occupy some little time," he said, again offering seats, which this time were accepted.

The priest then began with relating how Elfrida had first sought him on the day of

the thunderstorm at the confessional. What passed there he declined to communicate ; but, as he proceeded, he made it quite clear to Mrs. Foxley that he had all along urged Elfrida to confide in her—that he had at last told her that, before receiving her into the Catholic Church, she must confess all to her mother. “ Her nature,” he said, “ is one of such shrinking and sensitive timidity that the greatest tenderness is required in dealing with it. I am sure, Mrs. Foxley, it is not from any want of filial love or respect, but from a dread of your displeasure, that any seeming disingenuousness may have arisen. This I owe it to her to say ; the rest I owed it to myself to explain.”

He stopped, having throughout addressed Mrs. Foxley only. She felt it quite impossible to doubt that he spoke the simple truth. Not so Mr. Summerwood. He genuinely did not

believe a word he uttered, and rising, with a hard, incredulous look, said, haughtily,

"I suppose, Mrs. Foxley, we may go, as Mr. Godfrey evidently will tell us nothing more satisfactory than we have already heard."

As Mr. Summerwood spoke, Frederick Godfrey's features did not change, but his eyes rested upon the Rector with a glance keen as steel.

"Yes, we may go ; but before going, I wish to thank you, Mr. Godfrey, for your candid account, and to say that I fully exonerate you from all unfair influence."

This much Mrs. Foxley was resolved to say, come what might.

For the first time Frederick Godfrey was visibly moved ; but he only answered,

"Mrs. Foxley, from my heart I thank you."

A cloud came over Mr. Summerwood's face. He said disdainfully,

"Now, we want to see Miss Foxley. Perhaps, as she is not in her mother's house, you, sir, can tell us where to find her."

"That, sir, I cannot do. I saw Miss Foxley after service this morning; she was then, she told me, going home. Since then I have not seen her."

"My servant said she had gone to the chapel," said Mrs. Foxley, gently, the priest rising and Mr. Summerwood falling every instant in her esteem.

"Will you permit me, then, to go with you to the chapel?" said Mr. Godfrey, "It would be better, perhaps, for me to tell her there that it would be right for her to join you."

At this inferential assurance of his superior

influence with Elfrida, the Rector's face grew darker yet. But he made no opposition to the offer, and all three set off together.

When they arrived at the chapel, at Mrs. Foxley's request, Mr. Godfrey went in alone. He remained much longer than she expected. At last he returned, looking not a little perturbed.

"I cannot persuade Miss Foxley to come out. She told me she would not come unless I could say her salvation depended on it. This I could not say."

"That is to say," said Mr. Summerwood, "you persist in your determination to seclude this young lady from the influence of her legitimate protectors?"

"I was about to ask you, Mrs. Foxley," and Mr. Godfrey as he spoke almost turned his back upon Mr. Summerwood, "to go into the church yourself, and endeavour to

persuade your daughter to accompany you. I will remain outside."

Mrs. Foxley found her daughter kneeling before the little tawdry altar dedicated to the Virgin—an altar which was always, in spite of himself, revolting to the Priest's taste, as well as to some other feeling which he hardly cared to analyse. She rose on her mother's entrance, and threw herself into her arms.

"Oh! mamma, don't take me to Mr. Summerwood; he will be so angry! I am so happy here, dearest mamma! I cannot go—I cannot. I will do everything else you bid me. Father Godfrey says I ought, and I will—I will indeed; but oh! don't take me to Mr. Summerwood."

"I won't, I will not, since you dislike it so much. But I thought you liked him?"

"Once I thought he could absolve me



from my sins, and show me how to save my soul; but I was always afraid of him—always. And now I know he cannot, and it is useless for me to see him. Oh! mamma, if you could guess what I have suffered. And now I may have peace, if you will let me, dear, dear mamma!”

Never before had Elfrida so disclosed her heart to her mother. Never before had Mrs. Foxley been able to understand and feel for her as she did now.

“My darling child, you shall not see him unless you like. Stay here till he is gone, and I will send for you.”

“Thank you, mamma—dear mamma!” And Elfrida kissed her again as she had done on that dismal day when she had last arrived at Willesmere Court. “The good Father told me he was sure you would feel for me. He is always right, mamma—he is so good!”

When Mr. Summerwood saw Mrs. Foxley come out without her daughter, and heard that she was actually a consentient party to what he conceived to be the priest's triumph, he grew pale with suppressed rage—not the less violent that he was far too proud a man to betray it by loud words or an excited manner.

“Am I to understand then, Mrs. Foxley, that after having sent for me for the purpose of helping you to snatch Miss Foxley out of the hands of ‘designing priests,’ your own words, you have suddenly become a party in support of their influence? Madam, this passes the caprice of women. Another time I would advise you to know your own mind. As for you, sir,” he said, turning fiercely to the priest, “I leave you, as far as your conscience will permit you, to enjoy your success, with the mother as well as with the

daughter. Sure am I, whatever you may think, no good can come of the use of such means as you have condescended to employ." And with a haughty bow he walked away.

It might be difficult to say whether Frederick Godfrey or Mrs. Foxley felt his departure the greater relief. The former, though his conscience acquitted him of all unfair dealing, did not like his position—could even, in a sense, excuse Mr. Summerwood's view of it; and, in spite of her anger with him, Mrs. Foxley was aware that his reproaches were really not unjust.

"Ah!" she thought, as she and the priest stood together silently, "if Mr. Summerwood had only been Mr. Godfrey, and Mr. Godfrey Mr. Summerwood!" She was thankful now that her daughter would never be the wife of the Rector. The man was evidently a tyrant. Poor, poor Elfrida, who

she now knew felt even a light word from the mother who loved her so dearly, as a wound from which she shrank.

But, "Let justice be done, though the sky fall!" The Rector might be a tyrant. But to Elfrida he honestly meant to be, and would have been, a benignant tyrant, and Elfrida's mind was of that class which is unfit for, or rather incapable of freedom.

A husband whom she could trust as a god, and obey as a child, who would save her the pain of thinking, who would be her conscience while she was his plaything; this was what Elfrida needed, and Mr. Summerwood desired. And, may one ask, is this so very singular an idea of matrimony, even in Christendom?—though perhaps it is not always so broadly stated.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## PEACE.

A NEW era began now in the lives both of Mrs. Foxley and her daughter. Mrs. Foxley stipulated for a month, that her daughter might reconsider her resolution with regard to joining the Church of Rome, and that if she should then be of the same mind, she—would not give her consent, no, never ; but she would make no open opposition. With these conditions Mr. Godfrey, and, of course, Elfrida, were content. The former said to Mrs. Foxley,

“ Allow me to express to you my heart-

felt gratitude for the generous way in which, through all this affair, so painful to you, you have borne yourself towards me. You cannot tell, Mrs. Foxley, how thankful one may feel, even for justice !”

The priest seemed to speak with difficulty; but Mrs. Foxley believed him all the more that his words did not run off his tongue too glibly. For a moment it did pass through her mind—was this not an example of that kind of Jesuitism with which priests were usually credited? But she rejected the notion at once, almost with a blush. It was impossible that Frederick Godfrey could be in any sense a hypocrite.

Under his influence, Elfrida became more sensible and more helpful. She was taught now that to bear her mother’s burdens was part of the self-sacrifice of the religious life. Father Godfrey approved of her for doing

all those tiresome, mean things, and, glorified by his approbation, they were tiresome no longer. Her soul was safe, being entirely out of her own keeping; and the sense of this safety gave her step a lighter grace, her face a more vision-like beauty. Lovely, docile Elfrida!—a happy repose smiled out of the sapphire depths of her eyes; a childlike peace surrounded like an atmosphere her soft, dimpled features.

At the end of a month, with far less grief on her mother's part than the latter herself a few weeks ago could have believed possible, Elfrida was received into the Church of Rome.

Occasionally even, Mrs. Foxley now received the priest at her own house. "It was better," she said to herself, "that she should watch the progress of his influence with her daughter. The very few people

who knew anything about them, said, on the contrary,

“That cunning Jesuit of a fellow will soon make a proselyte of the mother as well as the daughter. He knows what he is about.”

This view of the matter was strengthened as the priest's visits to the widow and her daughter became more frequent. Mrs. Foxley learned to like Mr. Godfrey more and more. At last it became a confirmed habit that he should drop in of an evening once or twice a week. Mrs. Foxley could not conceal from herself that she looked forward to these evenings as the brightest threads woven into the sombre texture of her life. To Elfrida it was *bonâ fide* entertaining a heavenly messenger. To Frederick Godfrey himself, these evenings were as a reminiscence of a lost paradise. Home, home-



life, and home-love had always been so sweet to his reserved nature, which could not reveal itself except in an atmosphere of intimacy, and yet to which some such revelation was necessary.

On these occasions, they talked on all subjects save two—his personal history and their personal faith. Who, or what he had been, neither mother nor daughter knew, though the former gathered once, from something he let fall, that he had been at Oxford; and she knew him to be a “pervert,” for that he did not conceal. But though silent with regard to personal history, Mr. Godfrey was open enough in the enunciation of his opinions upon all subjects but one. Mrs. Foxley, during her secluded life, had never before come in contact with a mind so highly cultivated; but she was not yet too old to under-

stand, or, at least, to admire it. "Ah!" she sometimes thought, "if he were only not a priest!"

Most of Mr. Godfrey's conversation was addressed to her. Elfrida, with a little work in her hand, sat at the opposite side of the fire, and listened with venerating attention. Perhaps what she did not understand, she admired all the more.

When Frederick Godfrey, from his place by Mrs. Foxley's work-table, beheld her thus; seated in an antique, high-backed chair, a relic of Willesmere Court, the pliant grace of her figure, the exquisite purity of her complexion, and the "cocoon-coloured" hair resting on her head like a crown of gold, he was fain to compare her to a virgin lily in some rare mediæval illumination. He could see that she hung on his words as on the utterances of an oracle,

and the unconscious flattery was sweet—so sweet.

On one occasion, as he thus looked across, he caught her eyes fixed on his face with so earnest and worshipping a gaze that, totally forgetting what he was saying, he stammered, hesitated, and became quite confused.

“Is anything the matter?” asked Mrs. Foxley, anxiously.

“Can I get you anything?” cried Elfrida, starting up with eager interest.

“No, there is nothing the matter. I beg pardon: I remembered something I ought—that was all. Now, if you will kindly allow me, I will say good night.”

He had spoken with such consciousness, as if they must have read his feelings. But he saw at once how his explanation seemed quite natural to both. Was he not

a priest? Yes, he was a priest, and the thought pressed on him like a nightmare, as he sat dejectedly down in the old arm-chair by his lonely fireside in the lodgings by the market-gardens.

Distinction, power, domestic affection! who had had a fairer prospect of all these? or who had more earnestly desired them? He knew himself to be an ambitious man. Every day it became more clear to him that he was a man, too, of strong affections—not one who sought the superficial regard of many, but one to whom, all the more on this account, was necessary the abiding love of the few.

But was not religion renunciation? Why would that haunting voice whisper that it was renunciation, not of the attributes of humanity, but of their selfish misuse only? It was hard he could feel

no comfort in so tremendous a sacrifice.

And again, out of his memory, that angel's face looked at his with worshipping eyes.

Frederick Godfrey did not mistake Elfrida. He knew that if he were to command her on the morrow to return to the Anglican communion, to become a Mahomedan, a Brahmin, she would consent at once, in simplest reliance on his goodness and wisdom. But she was not the less interesting to him on that account. Rather was she not the very ideal of perfect womanhood?—Milton's ideal,

“He for God only, she for God in him.”

That night and the next day Frederick Godfrey fasted, and repeated innumerable offices and prayers for the benefit of his own soul. He wore a hair shirt, and next his flesh an iron cross. Yet all the time he

was haunted by a sense of the inapplicableness and inadequacy of such modes of discipline. Then there was confession. But from this his soul revolted, as from violation of its most solemn sanctuary. Yes, he belonged to the only historically and logically infallible church on earth, but his most sacred instincts shrank at this moment from its dicta as not only false, but loathsome. What had been so perfect speculatively, would not somehow fit into the needs of experience. His priesthood hedged him in on every side. It was vain any more to struggle for, even to dream of, either freedom of action or freedom of thought.

"Stone walls do not a prison make,  
Or iron bars a cage."

But the vows with which he had voluntarily bound himself seemed inexorable as Fate. Over and over again he repeated to him-

self the line of argument, so faultless in its sequence, which had determined his faith. It was surprising how often he did so. It seemed externally as faultless as ever. If, then, the Church really was the infallible interpreter of the will of the Creator, how great was his sin !

Thus poor Frederick Godfrey, constitutionally religious, intellectually sceptical, with that scepticism which asks for certainty, and makes no count of faith, and which is at once the root of unbelief and superstition, fought one of the hardest fights which falls to the lot of man, especially when, as in his case, the conscience is as scrupulous as the passions are strong.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.









